Childhood amid gold mining and armed conflict: Agency, child labour and humanitarian response in Colombia

A thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACR</td>
<td>Colombian Reintegration Agency [Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGC</td>
<td>Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia [Gaitanistas de Colombia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARN</td>
<td>Agency for Reincorporation and Normalisation [Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASGM</td>
<td>Artisanal and Small-scale Gold Mining</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASOBAMINARMEA</td>
<td>Association of Barequeros in Artisanal Mining of Medio Atrato [Asociación de Barequeros en Minería Artesanal del Medio Atrato]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUC</td>
<td>United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia [Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BACRIM</td>
<td>Criminal Bands [Bandas Criminales]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIETI</td>
<td>Inter-institutional Committee for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labour [Comité Interinstitucional ara la Prevención y Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIPRUNNA</td>
<td>Intersectoral Commission to Prevent the Use, Recruitment, and Sexual Violence of Children [Comisión Intersectorial para la Prevención del Reclutamiento, la Utilización y la Violencia Sexual contra Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes por grupos armados al margen de la ley y por grupos delictivos organizados]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNMH</td>
<td>National Centre for Historical Memory [Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCOMACIA</td>
<td>Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of Atrato [Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCOMOPOCA</td>
<td>Community Council of the Popular Peasant Organization of the Alto Atrato [Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Organización Popular Campesina Del Alto Atrato]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<td>---------</td>
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<tr>
<td>CODA</td>
<td>Operative Committee for the Abandonment of Arms [Comité Operativo para la Dejación de Armas]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CODECHOCO</td>
<td>Regional Autonomous Corporation for the Sustainable Development of Chocó [Corporación Autónoma Regional para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Chocó]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Colombian Peso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPMS</td>
<td>Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELN</td>
<td>National Liberation Army [Ejército de Liberación Nacional]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPL</td>
<td>Popular Liberation Army [Ejército Popular de Liberación]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARC-EP</td>
<td>Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FISCH</td>
<td>Inter-ethnic Solidarity Forum Chocó [Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAO</td>
<td>Organised Armed Groups [Grupo Armado Organizados]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GBP</td>
<td>Great British Pounds (Sterling)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDO</td>
<td>Organised Crime Groups [Grupo Delincuencial Organizados]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GMH</td>
<td>Historical Memory Group [Grupo de Memoria Histórica]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBF</td>
<td>Colombian Family Welfare Institute [Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Criminal Court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIAP</td>
<td>Institute of Environmental Research of the Pacific [Instituto de Investigación Ambiental del Pacífico]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>International Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPEC</td>
<td>International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAPP-OEA</td>
<td>Mission to support the Peace Process in Colombia [Misión de Apoyo al Proceso de Paz de la Organización de los Estados]</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Americanos]  

**M-19**  
19th of April Movement [Movimiento 19 de Abril]

**NGO**  
Non-Governmental Organisation

**NSAG**  
Non-State Armed Group

**SIRITI**  
Integrated Information System for the Identification, Registration and Characterization of Child Labour and its worst forms [Sistema de Información Integrado para la Identificación, Registro y Caracterización del Trabajo Infantil y sus peores formas]

**STD**  
Sexually Transmitted Disease

**UARIV**  
Unit for the Victims Assistance and Reparation [Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas de Colombia]

**UN**  
United Nations

**UNICEF**  
United Nations Children’s Fund

**UNIMIL**  
National Unit against Illegal Mining and Antiterrorism [Unidad Nacional contra la Minería Illegal y Antiterrorismo]

**UPC**  
Union of Congolese Patriots [Union des Patriotes Congolais]

**UREC**  
University Research Ethics Committee
Abstract

The exploitation of natural resources has become an essential financial lifeline for non-state armed groups in current conflicts. In Colombia, paramilitary forces, left-wing guerrilla groups and criminal organisations have increasingly combined illegal activities around drug trafficking with extortion and exploitation of mineral resources. In the unlicensed extraction of gold, children perform multiple forms of labour, including armed and unarmed roles that benefit armed organisations. However, academic attention and institutional assistance have been mainly directed to child combatants. The widespread stereotyping of children used to participate in armed conflict as manipulated armed fighters oversimplifies the complex realities of young people during natural resource conflicts and overlooks other equally vulnerable children. This ethnographic study focused on three mining-and-conflict-affected areas in Chocó, from October 2016 to June 2017, seeking to understand the lived experiences of working children and their possibilities for action and survival. It combined participatory observation, interviews and a collection of methods based on storytelling and imagination to better engage children in the research process. Besides giving particular value to local perceptions and children’s voices, this methodology offers an original approach to conduct research with young people in conflictive settings.

In order to understand the complex nature of childhood experiences in the research areas, I connect the literatures on the sociology of childhood, anthropology of conflict, and humanitarianism as guiding analytical frameworks. This enabled me to uncover multiple childhood experiences, as well as identify shortcomings in theoretical and practical responses. This thesis found that, in contrast to mainstream conceptualisations of child labour in extractive economies, young people in the research areas do not perform a set of fixed, observable roles. Rather, they adapt their networks of interaction, identities and meanings ascribed to childhood in their quest for survival. The complexity of their experience navigating combined forms of labour problematizes existing categorisations, the division between armed and unarmed roles, and the labels use to acknowledge their experiences.

In addition to methodological strategies, this thesis makes three significant contributions to theoretical debates around childhood, child labour, and humanitarianism. Firstly, I propose a networked interpretation of child labour that embraces the fluidity and ‘messiness’ of natural resource conflicts. Secondly, I expand the conceptualisations of children’s agency and social age by including the relationships of working children with illegal actors. Finally, I challenge the way vulnerability is currently used to categorise disadvantaged children within the humanitarian architecture. I demonstrate that, despite existing policies and the moral urgency to protect all children at risk, in practice intervention agencies give greater attention to child combatants, neglecting others just as vulnerable in mining-and-conflict-affected areas.
No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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Dedication and Acknowledgements

To my husband Chris

This PhD thesis has been the most incredible and challenging experience I have had, both at a professional and personal level. This study would not have been possible without the support, encouragement and love of several incredible people to whom I am deeply grateful and whom I would like to acknowledge here.

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Maura Duffy, for her timely and constructive advice and support. Thank you for fostering my creativity and imagination, for all the cups of tea we shared, but above all for always believing in my project and in me. I am also grateful to Kirsten Howarth, Roger Mac Ginty and Erica Burman for being part of my supervision team at different stages. Erica, thank you for agreeing to be on board during the ‘last mile’ of the journey, for your reassurance and guidance. Thanks also to the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute whose programme, amazing staff, and funding made this research possible.

I would also like to thank my friends. Victor, thanks for the cups of tea, theatre plays and unconditional friendship. Jose Luis, thank you for taking care of me in Chocó and for answering all the ‘urgent questions’ I had. Laura and Angélica for visiting me in Manchester and supporting me during the whole process. To all my colleagues at HCRI for their feedback and support – particularly Eric for his genuine interest in my wellbeing beyond the academic work, Maria for her understanding and friendship that always made me feel as if I was in Colombia, and Gosia for her solidarity and help. This thesis would have not been possible without the support of Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó, including Richard and all the wonderful staff who made my time in Chocó a rewarding experience. I want to express my gratitude to all the mining communities, the community councils, children and muchacho(as) who shared their experiences with me, welcomed me into their villages and shared with me long journeys along the Atrato and the Bebarama rivers. I also want to show my appreciation for the officials from NGOs, governmental institutions and think tanks who accepted being interviewed and helped me with additional contacts and information. Jessica, thank you for your amazing work proofreading this thesis.

To my wonderful family who have always been by my side during the multiple ups and downs of my PhD journey. Thanks to my parents, Javi and Tinis, for always being so proud of me even when my project was so confusing to explain to others. To my brother Cesar and his loving family, and my sister Cami for always taking care of me from a distance especially when I felt sad and uncertain about my academic path and skills. We are the proof that love travels beyond geographical boundaries.

And finally, to Chris for his ever-present support, for always believing in me and being so proud of my project. Thank you for your patience, for having married me when I was a student, for encouraging me to practice yoga and always reminding me of the importance of balance to avoid a burnout. Thank you for being the love of my live and the best support that someone can have by her side. ¡Te amo con todo mi corazón!
Note on the Author

Linda L. Sánchez Avendaño graduated with a BSc from the National University of Colombia in Political Science in 2008 and a Postgraduate Certificate in Armed Conflict and Peace from Los Andes University (Colombia) in 2010.

After completing her Bachelor’s degree, she began working on diverse research projects and humanitarian relief programmes with several Colombian governmental organisations, think tanks and NGOs. In 2013, Linda graduated from the University of York with an MA in Post-war Recovery Studies and undertook an internship with a local NGO in Northern Uganda called Youth Social Work Association. Between 2013 and 2015, she worked as a senior researcher in Colombia with the National Centre for Historical Memory and as a consultant for UNICEF Colombia carrying out research and interventions focusing on children affected by armed conflict.

In 2015, Linda began her doctoral studies at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute of the University of Manchester (UK). Over the course of her doctoral studies, Linda taught at undergraduate and graduate levels on several humanitarian and conflict-related courses including face-to-face and online classes. Furthermore, she has volunteered as a tutor of pupils from under-represented backgrounds with the ‘The Brilliant Club’ charity (2017-2018).

Her current learning interests include childhood and armed conflict; alternative research methodologies; post-conflict reconstruction; conflict theory; humanitarian practice; extractive economies; and human rights.
Introduction

The steady increase of the international demand for mineral resources has led to significant rises in their prices and to the unprecedented reliance of modern economies on these commodities. This has been an essential factor in the drive on the part of some non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to finance and maintain conflicts where primary commodities and sub-soil resources are some of the principal economic lifelines (Collier, 2000, p. 91; Ross, 2004, p.48). Countries where this has been documented include the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sierra Leone, Angola or Colombia, to name but a few. Even though young people and children comprise part of the workforce involved in such unlicensed extractive economies that benefit NSAGs’ warlords, academic and humanitarian attention has been predominantly directed towards their role as child combatants, as well as the environmental and macroeconomic impacts of these conflicts (see Keen, 1998; Le Billon, 2009).

The illegal extraction and extortion of money from gold mining are currently driving the reconfiguration and intensification of the protracted Colombian conflict, and a key component of this is children performing multiple forms of labour. Using the case study of Colombia, this thesis analyses the experience and possibilities of action and survival of those children and young people who are involved in and exposed to the hazards of the intersection between
extractive economies and armed actors. It applies a theoretical framework that approaches childhood, agency, and humanitarian action as social constructions, and thereby widens existing understanding of the coping mechanisms of disadvantaged young people during wartime as well as the motivations that drive humanitarian action regarding vulnerable children.

1.1 Background to the study

The questions and concerns that this study aims to answer are grounded in my own working experience as a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) consultant and leading researcher at The National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH).\(^1\) The CNMH is a Colombian governmental institution where, between 2013 and 2015, I had the opportunity to work on the historical reconstruction of issues that have affected children and adolescents during the long-lasting internal conflict.

While gathering documentation for a report on child recruitment for use in armed conflict, I found in an official report the description of a situation that unexpectedly became the starting point of this thesis. In 2014, the Ombudsman’s office reported that NSAGs were recruiting children from urban areas of Medellín to send them to work as miners, hitmen, or in the general logistics of mining areas of Antioquia, where they were also sexually exploited (Defensoría del Pueblo Colombia, 2014, p.29). Despite my interest, I found that further information on those cases was almost non-existent. The donors and CNMH project managers considered that the collection of the data of those situations was beyond the scope of the research I was then conducting. Furthermore, they believed that the link between child miners and NSAGs was not easy to document and prove.

\(^{1}\) Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica.
At the time, I was unaware of the situation in unlicensed gold mines, much less knowing the extent of the involvement of children in those economies under the control of NSAGs. My interest in working children in mines in conflict-affected areas became stronger when I found that the information was scarce, and child miners seemed to be treated as a separated and less vulnerable group than child combatants. What astounded me most was the invisibility of this phenomenon. Although I did not have the chance to visit mining areas prior to starting my PhD studies, I realised how the academic attention and the humanitarian response towards child soldiers visibly overshadows the experience of other children who also suffer the ravages of the Colombian conflict. Therefore, I started to wonder why this imbalance exists even within the organisation in which I was working. Who are these children? Could a child be a miner and a combatant at the same time? Is the use of children by NSAGs to extract minerals usual and frequent? Is there a clear-cut border that delimits when child labour in mines starts and ends in relation to child soldiering? Why has the situation of those children not been more deeply documented?

At the beginning of this study, considering the possibilities of an ‘adequate’ childhood, or even of finding children who were happy under conditions of armed conflict or working in dark mine pits, seemed impossible. Legal frameworks and intervention agencies conceive wars and hazardous forms of work as inherently contradictory to childhood (see UN General Assembly, 1989; ILO, 1999; UNICEF, 2005). However, the adaptation and tactical actions that I found children and young people were performing in the midst of extractive economies and violence in Chocó call for attention. They challenge normative definitions of childhood, current analyses of child labour, and the actual response given by child protection organisations to disadvantaged children.
These initial questions, added to my positionality as a Colombian-born scholar and former consultant and civil servant, motivated this study, which falls within two multidisciplinary research strands; namely, the sociology of childhood and humanitarian studies. Early sociological studies of childhood acknowledged children as active and competent social actors rather than incomplete beings in a process of adult formation (Jenks, 1996; James and Prout, 2015). This approach claims that childhood is a social construction shaped by culture, history and relationships rather than a mere biological stage in the lifecycle (Christensen and Prout, 2005, p.48). The study of childhood as a social construction has greatly informed numerous research studies on the experience of children immersed in different circumstances and from multiple non-Northern European backgrounds, including those involved in different types of child labour or affected by armed conflicts (Honwana, 2005; Rosen, 2005; Clark-Kazak 2009; Wells, 2009; Hashim and Thorse, 2011; André and Godin, 2014). This school of thought offers me the possibility of understanding the multiple childhoods constructed in areas where minerals and armed conflict intersect. Moreover, and similarly to other studies that align with this approximation to children’s experiences (see Downdey, 2003; Drumbl, 2010; Bøås, 2013), it helps to illuminate my analysis of children’s adaptation, negotiation and agency capacities.

However, academic studies on disadvantaged children usually classify them under one specific defining category (i.e., child soldiers, street children, or child miners). This thesis aims to overcome the limitation produced by these current analytical boundaries that are used in humanitarian practice aimed at approaching working children in war-affected areas, as well as in academic literature. Using local constructions of social age (Clark-Kazak, 2009) as a lens for analysing childhood, adulthood, vulnerability and possibilities for action, this study presents the experience of children who navigate between labels,
forms of work and vulnerable situations (Vigh, 2006). Moreover, it enables an unravelling of the puzzling issue of conceptualising children’s capacity of choice and tactical action (Honwana, 2005) in areas where multiple hazardous forms of work and violence intersect.

In recent years, humanitarian interventions towards children have been prominently influenced by legal frameworks that recognise children as the quintessential representation of vulnerability and innocence. As scholars from various disciplines have highlighted, disadvantaged children are used as icons of humanitarian campaigning, humanitarian values (Hutnyk, 2004; Carpenter, 2005; Brocklehurst, 2006, p.45; Smith, 2009; Dogra, 2012), and even as a ‘colonial metaphor’ of the intervention of international agencies in low-income countries (Burman, 1994; Manzo, 2008). However, this study demonstrates that not all groups of vulnerable children evoke equivalent institutional interventions and emotional responses. In mining-and-conflict-affected areas, children classified as child miners have received far less attention than their counterparts classified as child combatants even though their activities are linked and take place in the same geographical area.

Although several scholars have shed some light on the privileged attention given by welfare services and agencies to specific groups of children over others equally classified as the ‘most vulnerable’ (Omer and Reyes-Lugardo, 2011; Stokes and Taylor, 2004), there is still a need to deconstruct the humanitarian and development rhetoric regarding the vulnerability of children. Therefore, in this work, I critically examine the positionality, emotion-based impulses (Suski, 2009), and discourses that drive the action of officials towards child workers. Moreover, I scrutinise the existent hierarchies of value (Ophir, 2010) that lead to the institutional invisibility of some groups of vulnerable children during wartime.
While accepting the existing limitations of conducting academic research in conflict zones (i.e., limited access, fear and insecurity), as well as the increasingly restrictive ethical guidelines for conducting research with children and young people, my study approaches hazardous forms of child labour as a lived reality. As such, child labour presents multiple variations during wartime where analytical boundaries between groups of children and forms of work are redefined, along with those elements that inform policies. Therefore, this thesis presents new perspectives that contribute to critically revising the politics of childhood and the epistemologies of humanitarian intervention towards disadvantaged children.

In aiming to understand how children experience and navigate mining-and-conflict-affected areas and how intervention agencies respond to their situation, I spent eight months in three mining areas of Chocó. This department is located in northwest Colombia, and it has been one of the most conflict-affected areas of the country. Moreover, this department has significant ore deposits. Although Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities have traditionally worked using artisanal methods of gold mining, the global increase in gold prices since the mid-2000s has led to the mechanisation of mining, as well as the involvement of NSAGs in unlicensed mining sites. As such, Colombia provides an extraordinary case study for examining plural childhood experiences in times of upheaval and the ethics of representations of working children.

1.2 Research questions

As explained above, the study of children and armed conflict has predominantly focused attention on children performing armed roles in the service of armed groups. Meanwhile, the experience of children working in
extractive economies has been analysed mainly during peacetime, and its connection with other forms of work and armed actors has remained side-lined. The lived reality of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas demonstrates the need to connect the literature on childhood, conflict and humanitarianism in a way that enables critical revision of notions of children’s assumed inherent vulnerability, the exploitative connotations associated with their working experience, and the moral tenets invoked to protect them.

Although this study continually evolved, the academic and personal interest remained ingrained in the drive to understand and envisage how combined forms of hazardous work shape the possibilities for working children to operate and survive during armed conflict. To achieve this general aim using the theoretical grounding offered by the sociology of childhood, the anthropology of conflict and the study of humanitarian interventions, I asked the following three guiding research questions:

a) How do combined forms of hazardous work shape childhood experiences?

b) How do working children adapt when various forms of hazardous work combine during armed conflict?

c) How do intervention agencies perceive and assist children involved in combined forms of hazardous forms of work?

1.3 Thesis overview

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. Following this Introduction, Chapter Two analyses the theoretical debates and analytical gaps where this study makes its contributions, before I explain the theoretical grounding that frame the methodology and analysis of the thesis. The chapter first analyses the academic debates around the social construction of childhood, vulnerability
and the agency capacity of working children during wartime. In this section, I outline how the conception of children as vulnerable subjects is a modern construction, and the agency children exercise to make choices and survive while in the midst of constrained environments. The second section of this chapter scrutinises the existing legal and scholarly approaches given to children involved in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. I demonstrate the limitations of the classification of ‘the worst forms of child labour’ when analysing the transition between roles and the multiple trajectories followed by young people in these areas.

Following this section, I outline debates in the literature on humanitarian approaches to childhood and the use of vulnerable children as powerful icons for intervention and charity. I discuss how the imagery of Northern European and North American children, and the media, as well as the positionality of officials, play central roles when creating hierarchies of value and suffering even in cases where affected groups of children are entitled to the same rights and needs for attention. In the final section of Chapter Two, I explain the collection of concepts drawn from sociology, anthropology and humanitarian studies that I propose as a conceptual framework. The debates around the politics of childhood and the epistemologies of humanitarian intervention towards children are connected through this theoretical grounding so as to address the practical and theoretical gaps within which this thesis comes to life.

In Chapter Three, I provide a contextual and historical overview of the internal armed conflict in Colombia paying specific attention to how NSAGs and criminal organisations diversified their ‘criminal resource portfolios’ (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016, p.83) regarding mineral resources and illicit drugs. I then analyse the specific situation in Chocó where I gathered empirical data for this study and demonstrate why this area, was chosen as an appropriate case
study. I focus on the transition from artisanal and small-scale gold mining (AGSM) to more industrialised forms and the main changes that mining communities face due to the control exerted by outsiders and NSAGs.

Following this contextual underpinning, Chapter Four showcases the methodology used to carry out this research in Chocó in 2016-2017. I explain why this study was conducted using a collection of qualitative methods and how the chosen methodological approach fits within the conceptual grounding developed in Chapter Two and the research questions that frame this study. This chapter also explicates the central role of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local authorities in granting me privileged access to mining communities, which enabled me to build trust, and deepen my understanding of lived experiences through my immersion in multiple informal conversations with local miners and interactions with children and young people. Central to this thesis is the use of an ethnographic approach to the research activities conducted with working children, which I was able to adapt according to their social age and work schedules. The methodological chapter also outlines the limitations of the study and discusses the research process, the opportunities and barriers of the empirical context, as well as my interconnected positionalities as a researcher.

The following three chapters (Chapter Five, Six and Seven) present and analyse the empirical findings using the theoretical grounding developed in Chapter Two. Each of these chapters focuses respectively on one of the three sub-questions of this study. Chapter Five examines the local meanings of childhood and adulthood, how gold mining and armed conflict frame childhood experiences, and discusses how children and local communities act tactically in order to survive and interact with NGOs and governmental authorities. The second empirical chapter focuses on working children and how they adapt and
navigate within complex networks of hazardous forms of work and various forms of criminality. Following this, Chapter Seven discusses intervention agencies’ perception of, and approach to children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. This chapter contests the idea of child miners as the most vulnerable of children and explains the central role of the positionality of officials and their emotions in the delivery or denial of assistance. All the research questions are addressed through an inductive approach that also help to tests conceptual underpinnings of childhood, child labour, and humanitarian assistance using the empirical data gathered.

The three empirical chapters as a whole answer the main research question which asks: How do combined forms of hazardous work frame the possibilities of operation and survival of working children amid armed conflict? Built on these previous chapters, Chapter Eight discusses how the overall findings answer each sub-question and reiterate broader contributions to the available literature concerning childhood, humanitarian assistance and child labour amid hostilities. Moreover, this chapter culminates in offering a set of overarching conclusions and highlighting possibilities for future research. Through placing armed conflict and hazardous forms of labour as not inherently in contradiction to the social construction of childhood, this PhD thesis seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of childhood experiences in constrained environments. Overall, the research reveals that the capacity for negotiation and adaptation of working children and their communities challenges mainstream interpretations of child labour in extractive economies as only related to artisanal practice linked to the subsistence economy of mining families. Moreover, this study questions prevailing conceptions of all child labourers as equally vulnerable and the subject to the same protection. My research demonstrates that despite the representation of disadvantaged children as icons of vulnerability and the
moral urgency to protect them, the humanitarian approach towards them is neither neutral nor universal.
Throughout history, children have taken active parts in army structures and military campaigns around the world. However, it was only at the end of the twentieth century that a growing body of academic studies and international laws began to emerge concerning the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. While in subsequent years this has gone a very long way to establishing norms against the recruitment of children by state and NSAGs, there has also been a tendency, mainly due to media simplification of the issues, towards creating a standardized idea of what the experience of children associated with those groups means and involves. Academic studies, policymakers and intervention agencies have been primarily focused on the military aspects, or what has been categorised as ‘child soldiering’ (e.g. Singer, 2001 and 2005; Andvig and Gate, 2010; Dallaire 2011; UN, 2015). While contemporary efforts have, overall, been concentrated on reducing the number of children fighting as combatants within armed groups, little attention has been paid to the \textit{unarmed} roles that children perform in different capacities that are equally crucial in warfare, such as domestic tasks or involvement in economies of violence, and other working functions of armed groups.

Legal instruments have briefly mentioned these ‘additional’ activities but, in many respects, they have remained side-lined in importance compared to
military involvement. This is despite the fact that in current internal conflicts, the exploitation and extortion of natural resources have become an essential financial lifeline for criminal and rebel groups alongside legal and illegal agricultural commodities (Ross, 2004, p.48). Children have not only been recruited to participate directly in hostilities but also to perform as labourers in mines and other subset activities (IPEC, 2005; Bales, Trood and Williamson, 2009). Examples include child labour in diamond mines during the civil war in Sierra Leone (Peters and Richards, 1998, p.193); in coltan and wolframite extraction in DRC (ILO, 2012, p.177); in pigeon-blood rubies in Myanmar by the military junta (Rajan, 2007, p.13), as well as in gold mining in the recent history of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014, p.29). Clearly, the non-combat role that children play in current conflicts requires greater attention due to its growth and the limited knowledge of its functioning.

The participation of children in labour activities during armed conflicts is usually underemphasized, and its connection with wartime has been underestimated and perceived as a coincidental overlap or side-effect (e.g. IPEC, 2005, p.30; Bales, Trood and Williamson, 2009, p.107; Le Billon, 2009, p.346). Even though the coexistence of different forms of child labour in wartime is not new, incidences of child labour have been analysed and addressed as separate phenomena. Therefore, government authorities and intervention agencies have given far less priority to child labour in extractive economies in conflict-affected settings than child recruitment for armed conflict. These hierarchies of value persist even though both types of child labour are equally classified by the Convention 182 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as two of ‘the worst forms of child labour’ due to the moral and physical harm caused. The point that I want to make in this research is that by recognising children’s lived realities of work and its particularities during wartime, it is possible to revise current assumptions concerning childhood,
analytical and practical boundaries between various forms of child labour, and the hierarchies of value that inform policies. Paying more attention to these realities, would render institutional efforts aimed at assisting children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas more able to address their actual problems (Boås, and Hatløy, 2008, p.3).

This study questions the monolithic perception of child labour in mines as a hazardous form of labour linked only to poverty, which has been mainly analysed during peacetime. In doing so, it engages in a re-examination of the experience of children in mineral-based conflicts to better understand the interplay between the triad of natural resources, children, and NSAGs. I examine the roles and trajectories followed by children and young people in areas where child labour in mines converges with NSAGs, and minerals play a crucial role in financing illegal actors. Moreover, I interrogate the institutional and academic assumptions that identify work and armed conflict as the antipode of childhood. In doing so, this study makes a significant contribution to the field of childhood studies, particularly to those areas which caution that uncritical acceptance of international legislation on child protection could have adverse impacts on those who should be protected as vulnerable in both conflict and post-conflict settings (Hilson, 2010; Maconachie and Hilson, 2015; Rosen, 2005). Likewise, this thesis contributes to an emerging and growing body of scholarship focusing on the interaction of natural resources and armed conflict (Keen, 1998; Collier and Hoefflert, 2004; Ross, 2004; Arnson and Zartman, 2005; Le Billon, 2009; Rustad, and Binningsbø, 2012; Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016).

The chapter is divided into four parts, the first three sections analysing current debates and gaps in the literature regarding how we should understand and therefore respond to children in conflict and to their interaction with extractive
economies and NSAGs. Thereby, in the fourth part, an analytical framework is developed in order to examine, in subsequent chapters, the social constructions of childhood and agency, the actual roles performed around gold mining extorted and controlled by NSAGs, and the intersubjective preferences that drive humanitarian and development practitioners in their responses to the situation of the so-called ‘most vulnerable children’.

2.1 Childhood, vulnerability and agency during wartime

In this section, I reassess the representation of children used to participate in hostilities and other forms of child labour in the existing literature, as well as critiquing the stereotyping effect created by representing them only as manipulated subjects. This revision will help in understanding how children and their families adjust and negotiate multiple ideas of childhood and vulnerability in areas affected by protracted conflicts where mineral extraction takes place. I argue that it is necessary to de-demolish labour and armed conflict as the antithesis of childhood, thereby allowing space for an understanding of children as entitled agents with different capacities of choice. This section develops this argument in two ways. Firstly, I examine how the notion of childhood has been historically constructed, and the iconic representation of children as inherently vulnerable is questioned. Secondly, the capacity of choice, agency and appropriation of the children discourse is revised.

2.1.1 Children’s vulnerability as social construction

Children have not always been recognised as vulnerable or fragile. Historically, they have been involved in hazardous work and armed conflicts in different capacities. Young people have suffered the ravages of constrained socio-
economic conditions as workers and have also faced the overwhelming effects of wars as casualties, combatants and survivors. In the middle of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not uncommon to see impoverished children living on the streets of Europe’s main cities or working alongside old men in factories, mines, and diverse agricultural activities around the globe. Initially, the nascent idea to protect children was closely related to socioeconomic conditions and deprivation rather than participation in armed conflicts. Before and during the First World War, philanthropic work started to be done in different parts of Europe for poor children (Inglis, 1958, p.454), whereas during the eighteenth and nineteenth century wars had been seen as the possibility of ‘ennobling’ children’s lives rather than impairing them (Rosen, 2005, p.6). Although statistical information on the historical participation of children in wars is inconsistent since it is a highly ideological debate (Wells, 2009, p.151), estimates indicate that during WW1 around 250,000 boys and young men under the age of eighteen were enrolled in the British army (Van Emden, 2012, p.6). Similar experiences took place during the Second World War with young boys participating alongside their parents and older siblings in partisan and ghetto-based Jewish-resistance groups and the Easter Front group of the Soviet Union, as an opportunity for self-defence and survival (Rosen, 2005, p. 21).

However, the end of the Cold War was a significant turning point in the social representation of children, especially during wartime. When a myriad of intrastate conflicts\(^2\) replaced ‘traditional’ European wars between nation-states with regular army forces, it was claimed that those ‘failed states’ were unable to protect and bring happiness to their children. The United Nations (UN) report written by Machel (1996) was a milestone that contributed to changing the

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\(^2\) According to the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (2017), over 300 intra-state wars took place around the globe between 1946 and 2017. Nonetheless, these statistics mostly indicate the level of violence perpetrated rather than other broader effects for the victims, the actors involved or their goals.
conception of ‘child combatants’ as ennobled subjects. From here on, the use of children for armed conflict was labelled as a war crime in international scenarios characterised by the proliferation of organised criminal groups and the unclear separation between external and internal conflicts, as well as intentional attacks on civilians (Kaldor, 1999, p.2; Machel, 1996; Vautravers, 2008). Although hazardous forms of child labour have a long history, the idea of children as combatants was presented as new, as a much more recent modus operandi of rebel groups that intentionally abused and targeted children in catastrophic proportions (Machel, 1996, paragraph 24). The idea of children being associated with armed groups was considered as “simply and unequivocally wrong” (War Child, 2013 in Bodineau, 2014, p.116) and, as such, in need of tackling as a means to protect the integrity and special rights of those young people.

During the twentieth century, the age of eighteen became the benchmark adopted by most legal frameworks and international conventions to define the end of childhood. In addition to chronological age, vulnerability and dependency were consolidated as the foundations of modern conceptualisations of childhood. Thus, UN agencies characterised an ideal childhood as a precious time surrounded by love, caring adults, play and schooling where dangerous work or armed conflicts had no place. Indeed, UNICEF (2005) defines childhood as:

The time for children to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults. It is a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation.

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3 Variables such as corruption, weak institutions, large populations or bad neighbours are arguably other factors that may create favourable scenarios for war (Sabonis, 2001; Fearon, J.D. and Laitin, 2003).

Consequently, the association of those under the age of eighteen with labour activities such as gold mining or use by NSAGs is inconceivable, exceptional, and synonymous with the loss or end of childhood. However, in reality, this idealised conceptualisation of childhood is nuanced and needs to be interrogated by examining the experience of children living in constrained environments where poverty and armed conflict are deeply rooted.

Intervention agencies consider the assessment of vulnerability as an essential means to identify levels of exposure to hazards and circumstances where particular agents should be protected and empowered. However, this process has led in some cases to the proliferation of ideas of pity, the “pornography of pain” or “compassion fatigue” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p.27; Calhoun, 2010, p.33). Those considered vulnerable are usually represented as voiceless, fragile or even pathetic (Hewith, 1997, p. 167 in Bankoff, 2001, p.28). A further issue regarding children is that, since the twentieth century, vulnerability has been presented by scholars and international organisations as an inherent component of childhood. Children, considered as the seed of future generations and innocent subjects in need of protection, were positioned as epitome of vulnerability (Carpenter, 2005; Suski, 2009, p.203).

The ‘universal’ idealised version of childhood built upon love, family, innocence and the need for protection made controversial any association between children and their participation in acts of violence, dangerous work, or crime. The idea of child miners working in hazardous environments or ‘child combatants’ as children who harm other children or adults, seemed outrageous or ‘unchildlike behaviour’ (Aitken, 2001). In summary, they were viewed as exceptional cases that are outside the norm (e.g., Happold, 2005; Dallaire, 2011; SOMO, 2015, p.15). While the discursive Northern European and North American representations of child combatants, were useful for the design of
interventions and advocacy for those children forced to commit atrocities by
diverse armed groups, they also created stereotypical ideas of the experiences
of children during armed conflict. Little space was left for the comprehension of
other forms of child labour that intersect with the military recruitment of
children during such conflicts. Likewise, these stereotypes obscure the
possibility that ‘different childhoods’ (Boudillon, 2006, p.1205; Frønes, 1993, p.1)
can co-exist with engaging in armed conflict or other forms of interaction with
armed groups.

Due to their argued fragility and vulnerability, the participation of children in
civil wars and hazardous forms of labour is commonly explained as acts of
negligence, poverty, manipulation, or the use of force by the adults who recruit
them. Echoing the ideas of Aitken (2001), I argue that the relationship between
armed conflict, labour and childhood should not always be seen as ‘unchildlike
behaviour’ or the loss or end of childhood. As the existence of child labourers
and child combatants has a long history in protracted conflict-affected areas,
this has involved negotiation and (re)configuration of childhoods where
children play essential roles as agents. Thus, the explanation of the use of
children in hazardous forms of labour such as gold mining, or for armed
conflict, based only on manipulation, lack of opportunities or poverty misleads
the discussion. It does not recognise other explanations and interpretations
made by children themselves in regard to their environment.

The ideas of innocence, vulnerability and need that are attached to modern
Northern European and North American notions of childhood, placed children
in a privileged position for protection during disasters and emergencies (Mead
and Wolfensterin, 1955; Cunningham, 1991; Rosen, 2005). Women, senior
adults, and children were iconised as the genuine representation of civilian
suffering and, thus, as the most vulnerable populations in the construction of
the narratives of humanitarian and development assistance (Carpenter, 2005; Bornestein, 2010, p.127). The idea of vulnerability is, therefore, a key concept in humanitarian thought that has been used to help and protect populations considered disadvantaged especially during wartime, poverty and natural disasters. However, children in the same disadvantaged situation are not equally vulnerable.

Chambers (1989, p.1 in Bankoof, 2001, p.25) argues that vulnerability is a process that is historically and socially constructed, and that it is related to the ability of disadvantaged populations to cope with hazards that can affect them physically, psychologically, socially and economically. Although the ability to respond to hazards is closely related to access to certain resources, the classification of vulnerable populations based only on poverty levels does not explain why people within the same socioeconomic standing have different responses to disasters (Hewitt, 1997, p.147 in Bankoof, 2001, p.25). As Bankoof, (2001, p.19) proposes, vulnerability, as well as tropicality and development, should not be taken for granted. These concepts reflect particular beliefs and discourses of power that generalise and stereotype certain regions and populations as more prone to disasters, diseases or violence. Drawing on Bornideau’s theorisation on vulnerability (2014, p.124), this study suggests that the state of vulnerability of children should be understood as “the result of different factors shaping their situation, instead of an inherent trait of childhood”. Through this, a more nuanced image is produced and agency capacities are recognised.

2.1.2 Agency capacity and decision making

Scholars and intervention agencies have claimed that the ‘inherent’ immaturity of children and their assumed lack of understanding make inauthentic their decisions to voluntarily join armed groups or undertake dangerous forms of
work (Conradi, 2013, p.1212; Human Rights Watch, 2008; Beber and Blattman, 2013). According to this current of thought, the conception of the ‘willingness’ of children misleads understandings of the forced character of their recruitment. It is argued that children and youths in war-affected areas do not make free decisions as they are under diverse constraining conditions such as poverty, armed threat, orphanhood, sexual violence, lack of education, or manipulation (Machel, 1996, paragraph 38; Bett and Specht, 2004; Omer and Reyes-Lugarbo, 2011, p.353). Furthermore, hazardous forms of labour are argued to be directly linked to exploitation and the disruption of schooling (Bhukuth, 2008, p.387; Lieten, 2011).

Some characteristics of children drawn from developmental psychology that have been put forward to explain why children are considered ‘perfect’ combatants or labourers in hazardous activities are immaturity, innocence, ability to follow orders, likeliness to perpetrate atrocities, and their limited capacity to differentiate right from wrong acts or to discern the consequences of their actions (Hogan, 2005, p.27; Happold, 2005, p.10; Singer, 2006, p.x; Dallaire, 2011, p.35; Omer and Reyes-Lugarbo, 2011, p.345). These interpretations have been powerful arguments that persist in the humanitarian world. However, they do not indicate the only reasons children might be drawn into hazardous forms of labour. As Bodineau (2014, p.123) argues, “child soldiers are not totally embodied in the same figures”. Children have different needs during wartime, as well as backgrounds, experiences of interacting with NSAGs, and motives to undertake both armed and unarmed roles. Therefore, the agency and decision-making capacity of children are crucial elements to take into account when seeking to explain, from a broader perspective, their participation in conflicts and its interconnection with different types of labour.
The representation of child labourers as manipulated impoverished subjects who engage with NSAGs during wartime only as combatants hides the multiple nuances and variations of the experiences of children in conflict-affected areas where minerals are at stake. Likewise, this iconic representation of children overlooks their experiences as active agents within their contexts. As Lieten (2011, p.2) argues, one of the central debates around child labour revolves around defining it since children take part in multiple activities simultaneously such as schooling, working, playing, or supporting domestic tasks. Therefore, labelling children only as labourers may turn a blind eye to the other activities performed by them. Moreover, since it depends on the nature of the work, the gender of the child, the socio-cultural context, and the subjective value attached to the work performed, the borderline between formative and dangerous work is not typically clear (Lieten, 2011, p.3).

Several counterarguments derived from the field of social constructionism of childhood have shown the pertinence of unravelling the representation of childhood and the issue of children involved in dangerous forms of labour. Instead of conceiving biological and psychological development as the main features that define childhood, this approach conceives childhood, youth, and adulthood as constructions woven from specific social interactions. Through these interactions, particular meanings are ascribed to the stages of the life cycle (La Fountaine, 1986 in Eyber and Ager, 2004, p.197; Clark-Kazak, 2009). Thus, childhood is not a universal category bounded by chronological age. Rather, it is shaped by multiple interrelationships between peers and generations, as well as social, historical and cultural processes (Christensen and Prout, 2005, p.48; Eyber and Ager, 2004, p.197; James and Prout, 2015). Therefore, according to this school of thought, children and their decisions cannot be seen in isolation from the other social groups that make up their communities (Eyber and Ager,
2004, p.197), nor from the local and global structures that “organize and construct their lives” (Wells, 2009, p.15).

The approach of sociology of childhood considers children as active and competent subjects able to shape their own experiences and the contexts in which they are embedded, as well as being capable of negotiating with adults the boundaries of their spaces of operation (Punch, 2004, p.94; Emond, 2005, p.124). The analysis of children’s experiences, therefore, implies the inclusion of their voices, their perceptions and the acknowledgement of their capacity for choice. This acknowledgement needs to go beyond formal recognition of their rights to be heard and to form their views, as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Jenks, 1996; Hart, 2006; Solberg, 2015; James and Prout, 2015). As Coles highlights (2002 as cited in Marten, 2002, p.5), children “clearly understand what is at stake in the religious and political conflicts in which their countrymen and women fight”. In fact, for them, the concept of war is more intuitive and easier to understand than the abstract idea of peace.

In considering the development of the concept of the ‘universal child’, it is worth noting how the claimed lack of capacity of choice and agency of children is not fixed in international legal frameworks (Bonideau, 2014, p.117). Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognised the capability of children for “forming his or her own views and the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (United Nations, 1989, 12.1). This standard is nonetheless contradictory as children’s views regarding their participation in conflicts or other forms of hazardous labour are not taken into account in other legal instruments. For instance, Article 3 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that armed forces can recruit underage soldiers as long as their enlistment is voluntary, and they have authorisation from their parents or guardians. However, Article 4 of the
same Optional Protocol establishes a different consideration regarding NSAGs, since it states that under-18s should not, under any circumstance, be recruited to participate in hostilities. In either option, the views of the recruited child are not taken into consideration.

Furthermore, this double standard validates the recruitment of children in national armed forces but invalidates their recruitment in rebel groups, even in cases when parents agree with the recruitment of their children in NSAGs (e.g., Omer and Reyes-Lugardo, 2011, p.318). Scholars have also demonstrated how even European regular armies represent abuse to those under-age soldiers who have died, suffered sexual abuse, humiliation and illness (Breen, 2007, p.74).

Recent academic studies aligned with the sociology of childhood have shown how the agency capacity of children has been present in hazardous forms of labour such as joining NSAGs as combatants (Peters and Richards, 1998, p. 184; Honwana, 2005; Rosen, 2005; Marten, 2000, p.5; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008, p. 445; Drumbl, 2010); sex-for-money exchange (Cole, 2004); child trafficking (Bastia, 2005, p.77); drug trafficking and organised crime (Dowdney, 2003); child labour in mineral mines (Boás, 2013; André and Godin, 2014); and unaccompanied migration processes (Hashim and Thorse, 2011). However, the more abstract issue of conceptualising children’s agency where extractive industries and protracted armed conflicts intersect has remained understudied. My study contributes to filling this academic gap by analysing the experiences and agency capacity of children and young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. I argue that despite the socio-economic and environmental constraints that communities face in those areas, children and young people have developed multiple strategies of agency and survival.
Following the ideas of Maconachie and Hilson (2016, p.137), it is argued here that the rigid appliance of international conventions and frameworks could preclude the resignification and adaptation of different childhoods in regard to armed conflict, labour and other situations that are typically considered opposed to childhood from Northern European and North American perspectives but that are viewed very differently in other contexts. As André (2014, p.183) argues, children’s rights should go beyond legal considerations as these are neither neutral nor universal. Their interpretation is continuously “done, undone or redone” (ibid.) by children and their communities to meet the socioeconomic challenges that they face on an everyday basis.

In summary, in analysing the experiences of children in areas where minerals and protracted conflicts converge, it is necessary to consider how agency capacity and perception of children and their families take place in regard to childhood, vulnerability, exploitation, child labour, and NSAGs. This study thus takes armed conflicts and child labour not as an end or a deviation from childhood, but as an inherent component of child socialisation in many contexts. Likewise, the participation of children in wars or hazardous forms of labour does not imply that they are totally vulnerable and without agency. It is argued here that the existence of protracted conflicts has made violence the prevalent scenario into which generations are born and socialised. Therefore, in those specific settings, local communities normalise the threat of armed conflict and, in some cases, this normalisation is “transmitted to others as part of that culture’s body of knowledge” (Anderson, 1968, p.303 in Bankoff, 2001, p.31). Thus, I explore how agency and different childhoods are adapted and negotiated in regard to their socioeconomic conditions while also concerning armed conflict beyond the boundaries of international conventions.
2.2 Child labour in mines financing conflicts

This section analyses the legal and academic approaches to children living and working in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. It also examines the existing analytical gaps that persist in the body of work explaining the roles and trajectories followed by young people in these settings. I argue here that the analytical boxes that classify ‘the worst forms of child labour’ do not allow for a broader comprehension of the interactions between various forms of labour during wartime, nor for the multiple roles performed by children in extractive industries that fuel conflicts. To develop this argument, the section analyses the international framework used to approach child labour in hazardous conditions and discusses some cases where child labour in mineral extraction and conflicts have taken place.

Convention No. 182, adopted by the ILO in 1999, helped to establish a scale of value regarding ‘conditional’ or acceptable forms of child labour and ‘unconditional’ or inadmissible activities for children. The latter refers to those forms of child labour that “entails violations of children’s rights that demand immediate action for their prohibition” (ILO, 2002, p.11). Within this framework, not all work performed by people under the age of eighteen is considered to be child labour. Many children perform paid work that is considered light work which can contribute to their personal development, education, and their family’s economies (ILO, 2002, p.9). However, both child labour in gold mining and the use of children in armed conflict are considered as some of the worst forms of child labour due to the extent and severity of moral and physical harm caused to children. Therefore, there can be no justification for children’s work in these activities (IPEC, 2005, p.1; ILO, 2002, p.30).
Although the ILO has established some guidelines to define child labour, there is no unique generally accepted definition. As Zelizer (1985, p.63) argues, child labour is a social practice that transcends its economic expression represented by income. Dozens of countries have established different interpretations of the concept of child labour in policymaking. This is especially common in contexts where the national language (such as Spanish, Portuguese and French) does not provide a clear differentiation between work, as an economically reattributed activity and labour, as an activity that mainly implies physical effort but is not necessarily paid, whereas in English, this is made clear.\(^5\) (IPEC, 2008, p.20; André, 2014, p.191; Bhukuth, 2008, p.387).

As Schelemer highlights (2000, p.10), it is not possible to have a single definition of child labour since, like childhood, it is shaped by social relations, different paternalist ideals, and various perceptions regarding exploitation. Therefore, some activities, such as farming, babysitting, domestic tasks or woodcutting, that are considered as work in certain societies can be considered as help, family support and educational training in others (IPEC, 2005, p.15). Examples can be found in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan where children take part in compulsory work in cotton plantations as part of their education (Bhat, 2013, p.61), and even in post-conflict Sierra Leone where some children are enrolled in diamond and gold mining as an important part of their household income (Maconachie and Hilson, 2015). Likewise, in Ghana, although child miners have appropriated the institutional discourse of child rights concerning child labour and work, some of them do not regard mining as labour or as exploitative. Mining is essential for their family income, and it corresponds with their duty to help their elders.

\(^5\) For example, according to the Cambridge Dictionary *work* can be understood as “an activity, such as a job, that a person uses physical or mental effort to do, usually for money”. On the other hand, *labour* can be understood as “practical work, especially when it involves hard physical effort” (Cambridge Dictionary online, 2016).
In practice, when children are involved in extractive economies that finance NSAGs, child miners and child combatants are classified and understood in the literature and before the law as separate subjects (e.g., Boãs, 2013; André and Godin, 2014). In other cases, scholars and intervention agencies and advocates have reinforced the focus on the military experience of children as combatants (e.g., Rosen, 2005, p.59; Human Rights Watch, 2012), or information regarding non-hostility related activities performed by children in mining areas is only briefly mentioned (e.g., Laudati, 2013, p.40; Omer and Reyes-Lubango, 2011, p.335; ILO, 2006, p.5). Existing literature has not analysed in any depth children who are part of armed structures performing unarmed working functions in extractive economies.

The existence of this gap can be explained by the construction, in part thanks to the media, of so-called child combatants as the quintessential representation of children affected by armed conflicts. The stereotypic image that presents children used by NSAGs only as those passive and voiceless children holding guns and wearing camouflage (e.g., Happold, 2005; Singer 2006; Dallaire, 2011) has made the experience of other children working in other roles less visible. Even though the existence of child combatants as dramatic realities is a raw fact, their experiences represent only one facet of the use of children during armed conflict. As Reynolds claims (2004, p.264), the eradication of the use of children as combatants is “to abolish only the one use to which they are put during war”. This lack of visibility of the experience of child labourers during wartime, in the relevant literature, means that, in general, these children continue to be unprotected through ineffective programming and ultimately leads to the non-recognition of serious violations of human rights.

Although there is a growing body of scholars who have studied the relationships between mineral resources and armed conflicts (Keen, 1998;
Collier and Hoefflert, 2004; Ross, 2004; Arnson and Zartman, 2005; Le Billon, 2009; Rustad and Binningsbø, 2012), these theories have not covered and explained the social trajectories followed by children involved in these. Some progress has been made nonetheless by acknowledging the existence of children working in various roles in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. For instance, Rosen (2005, p.70) highlights the involvement of children during the war in Sierra Leone as miners in diamond sites, as combatants, or both. Similarly, studies conducted on the experience of children from eastern mining areas of DRC during the second Congolese War (1998-2003) (ILO, 2006; Omer and Reyes-Lubango, 2011) shed light on the existence of child miners and child combatants under control of the ethnic militia, the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPCs)6.

Contrary to the description given by Rosen (2005) where some children were both miners and combatants, Reyes-Lubango (2011) and the ILO report (2006) present child miners and child combatants as separate agents. Though both categories of children are claimed to be equally victimised, these authors do not explain the relationship between these two categories. Moreover, the existing literature has not elucidated how children transit between working functions, whether they are performed separately or not, nor the determinants of becoming a child miner or a combatant – or both. Likewise, the shifting roles performed within a complex network of illegal actors are not covered. Thus, the pertinence of conducting research that explores these relationships is clear.

When the relationship between extractive economies, children and NSAGs is not taken into account, the interpretation of the situation is oversimplified. In the campaign, ‘A load too heavy’, launched by the ILO in 2005 to call the attention on the issue of child labour in mining, it was held that:

6 Union des Patriotes Congolais
Child labour in mining is a problem that can be solved. The number of children involved is large but not overwhelming. Mining sites are remote but concentrated in particular areas. And government officials, enterprises and workers’ organizations in this sector have the will and determination to do what they can to see this terrible situation cleaned up (ILO, 2005, p.7).

Although it is not clear what the threshold would be for a situation to be considered overwhelming, as discussed in more detail below in Section 2.3, in the same report, the ILO (2005) also claimed that there are feasible solutions to the issue of children working in mines due to the apparent manageable number of victims. According to the recent global estimates made by the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), there are around one million children worldwide between the ages of five and seventeen working in mining and quarrying, even in countries that ratified Convention No. 182 (ILO, n.d.). Albeit this form of child labour mostly takes place in peacetime, this vague statistic does not differentiate children working in conflict-affected settings. Moreover, international organisations have only imprecisely reported the experience of children working in the service of NSAGs when they actively participate in hostilities. Existing statistics need further revision since these also do not allow establishing the overlap of different armed and unarmed tasks around the extraction of gold. Therefore, it is essential to determine how many of the children working in mining areas have also been engaged in other forms of child labour controlled by NSAGs.

Moreover, the ILO and other international organisations assert that the issue of child labour in mines is solvable mainly because the participation of children in

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7 The ILO estimated in 2000 that around 0.3 million children were victims of recruitment (ILO, 2002, p.19). UNICEF estimated in 2007 that around 250,000 children were “serving as child soldiers” (UNICEF, 2007, p). Child Soldiers International estimates that, since 2016, children have participated in hostilities in at least 18 conflicts worldwide (Child Soldiers International, 2018). However, recent updates to this figure are not available.
gold-based extractive economies is perceived as being confined to the scope of artisanal and small-scale goldmining (ASGM) carried out in peacetime. Likewise, academics and child protection organisations have traditionally linked poverty and family-income needs as the main drivers of mining work (ILO, 2006; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008, p.13; André and Godin, 2014). In the performance of this physically demanding activity, children’s roles are typically linked and compared with those performed by women, such as grinding, breaking stones, preparing food, or washing gravel (ILO, 2001, p.23; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008, p.14; André and Godin, 2014, p.171; Plotter, 2016, p.1016). Meanwhile, young and grownup males generally perform the hardest roles such as underground mining. Therefore, the complexity of the experience of children working in mechanised forms of mining or areas where extractive industries are in the service of NSAGs has not been taken into account in the equation of solving child labour in mines. I argue that the approach given to child labour in mines should consider the specificity of conflict-affected contexts where a collection of actors and forms of labour are in place.

Cases of mining, recruitment and armed conflict can be found around the world in countries such as Tanzania, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic or DRC. However, the overlap between the recruitment of children by NSAGs and mining has appeared in the literature as a ‘coincidence’ during the actions of armed groups to plunder minerals to fuel conflicts (e.g., IPEC, 2005, p.30; Bales, Trood and Williamson, 2009, 107; Le Billon, 2009, p.346). Those children that are working only in non-military related activities are hardly recognised as part of the structures of NSAGs by national legislation and humanitarian organisations. However, the Paris Principles (2007, p.7) refers to “a child associated with an armed force or armed group” as “[...] any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity”. The consideration of “any capacity” allows a
more holistic comprehension of the complexity of the involvement of children in the operation of armed groups. Thus, here, I argue that, since the participation of children in extractive industries under the control of NSAGs can be considered a variant of recruitment, it should not be regarded as a disconnected form of ‘mere’ child labour. Children are integrated into the functioning of resource-based conflicts in different capacities.

The UPC operated in DRC from 1998 to 2003 in gold mining areas controlling the extraction of this mineral as well as the trade routes (Mullins and Rothe, 2008, p.91). In this particular case, rebels used children and young people as combatants, some were sexually abused, and others were forcibly and simultaneously involved in the extraction of gold and ancillary roles (Warpinski, 2013, p.178). During the trial in the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, the leader of this NSAG, the Trial Chamber considered that recruitment of children covers different roles including those “which, by nature, mean that they will never see combat action”. The decisive aspect to consider in assessing whether indirect roles constitute active participation in hostilities is that the role performed exposes children to “real danger as a potential target”. This consideration highlights the broader scope of activities that could be included, but also the ambiguity in defining which activities can be considered as active participation in hostilities.

Forced child labour in mines and sexual abuses against children were excluded from the list of transgressions perpetrated by the UPC. The Trial Chamber claimed that the exclusion was made on the grounds that these situations require a case-by-case approach that exceeded the scope of the trial. This illustrates how, when child labour in mines and other forms of child labour carried out during wartime are not adequately acknowledged as connected to

8 Prosecutor v Lubanga Dyilo (Judgment) ICC-01/04-01/06 (14 March 2012) [820]
9 Ibid. [628]
the functioning of an armed group, their relevance in the perpetration of war crimes is not considered. Consequently, anthropological and sociological research is needed in order to determine the various ways whereby children are powering the financial activities of NSAGs through mining, how they are recruited, and how they make decisions to get involved in the extraction of minerals when this situation takes place voluntarily.

To summarise, this section examined some of the ambiguities of current academic and legal interpretations of ‘child labour in hazard conditions’ during wartime. Although the use of children for armed conflict has been the iconic representation of children affected by NSAGs, their involvement in other hazardous forms of labour which are equally crucial for the operation of those groups has not been integrated into the analysis. Intervention agencies and scholars have approached and analysed those forms of labour separately even in the cases where they are simultaneously undertaken. Consequently, more attention needs to be paid to the relationship forged between children working in unarmed roles, the actual tasks performed, the social trajectories followed, as well as their lived realities of work.

2.3 Institutional response: Vulnerable within ‘the most vulnerable’

In this section, I discuss the existing contradiction in the implementation of protection frames towards the most vulnerable children. I argue that the prioritisation of urgency regarding the protection of children in certain situations over others is driven by different hierarchies of suffering and value, and specific Northern European and North American imagery and representations of children.
Vulnerability and human suffering have informed the philanthropic and apparent selfless humanitarian action and response to suffering from high-income countries since the late eighteenth century based on values of ‘universal solidarity’ as well as the need to care (Halttuen, 1995 in Chouliaraki, 2013, p.26; Fassin, 2010; Barnett, 2011). These discursive elements have been spread worldwide especially since the Cold War based on the pillars of neutrality, independence, humanity and impartiality. However, the available literature has increasingly debated the claimed lack of political interests behind these pillars (Calhoun, 2010, p.52; Ophir, 2010; Barnett, 2011; Nelson, 2015). Recent crises and disasters have demonstrated that the conceptualisation of ‘universal children’, as well as their assumed universal vulnerability, is relative since in practice some children are seen as more vulnerable than others even in similar hazardous conditions. However, although all children are considered as vulnerable, there are particular situations that make some children even more vulnerable than others (i.e., those whose NGOs term ‘the most vulnerable and least privileged’), such as those living in poverty, orphanhood, neglect, war, exploitation, famine and disease (e.g., World Vision, 2014; Gates, 1999, UNICEF et al., 2012).

Although suffering is not a novel situation, humanitarian response as a responsibility and imperative to protect is recently constructed based on the imagery of vulnerability, rights and emotions (Fassin, 2010, p.270; Bordineau, 2014, p.114). As Calhoun (2010, p.29) suggests, the moral responsibility to protect does not appear as an imperative “just because bad things happen in the world”. It is closely related to representations of how the world should be. In this production, language and emotions play pivotal roles in the moral construction of “the worthiness of those suffering” (Suski, 2009, p.210) and the subsequent sentiments of compassion, tenderness or even guiltiness. As mentioned in Section 2.1.1, even though neither child labour nor the
involvement of children in armed conflicts are new (Cunningham, 1991; Rosen, 2005; Stella, 2000; Van Emden, 2012), as the concept of childhood has progressively developed in the global north, the perception of children’s participation in labour and hostilities has also been transformed. Calhoun’s (2010, p.31) theorisation of humanitarian emergencies helps to explain how, beyond the magnitude of suffering, different elements are combined to perceive a situation as problematic, against normality and urgent. Some of these factors are the perception of suffering, international regulations and standards, cultural shifts in the way a situation is understood, empathy with “distant suffering”, mass media, technologies of war and the existence of a body of humanitarian organisations (Calhoun’s (2010, p.30). However, if the consideration of a particular situation as problematic and urgent does not depend on magnitude, the question that remains is what is the threshold that separates a problematic situation from a state of emergency or disaster.

Stokes and Taylor (2014) attempted to explain why child protection workers attributed a higher level of risk and provided more contact hours and service provisions to sexually or physically abused children than to neglected children. Professionals give preference to abused children despite the widely known consequences of neglect on children and the high number of those cases reported. Through the implementation of a factorial survey of 118 professionals in Canada, the study concluded that the perception of the type of harm influenced decision-making (Stokes and Taylor, 2014, p.387). At the same time, they state that practitioners assess neglect by the use of instruments that do not take into account the environment in a holistic manner, the chronicity of the neglect, and the support parents need. Although this study was not applied in a conflict-affected setting, it provides some understanding of the importance of subjective considerations that are at play concerning child protection that are pertinent to questioning the representation of children in hazardous
environments. As Suski (2009, p.210) notes, despite rhetoric of the universalism of humanitarianism, it is “selectively applied, often according to how humanitarian ‘clients’ are themselves constructed”.

Significantly, UN representations and imagery of disadvantaged children have had a powerful impact on civil society, as well as humanitarian and development discourse. The media has played a crucial role in the shaping of values regarding vulnerability through the transmission of images of those vulnerable children considered most in need of urgent action. For example, Smith (2009) analysed the iconography of children used in social justice documentaries on child combatants in Rwanda and Uganda, and of poor children living in the Red Light district in Calcutta (India). Adopting the concept of a “subaltern population” proposed by Spivak (1996, p.288 in Smith, 2009) to refer to those excluded who live in a colonised context with no opportunities for social and economic mobility, Smith (2009) illustrates how children had become a discursive commodity. According to her study, disadvantaged children are sentimentalised and used by humanitarian advocates to achieve action “at least until they reach 18 years when they cease to be defined as children” (Kipnis, 2006, p.73 in Smith, 2009, p.161). Similarly, Bornstein (2010) examines the role of orphans in humanitarian discourse, as a social category that brings attention to a particular group of children but also functions as an instrument of charity for ‘the excluded’.

This imagery nonetheless has been counterproductive in some cases as it has led to generalisations, more exclusion, homogenisation and stereotypes. Suski (2009, p.210), for instance, illustrates how some children are more sentimentalised than others, using the examples of children from Africa as the conventional representation of starvation while children from the Gaza Strip who suffer severe food storages are not. Likewise, some issues that affect
children are prioritised over others. During the ICC trial against Thomas Lubanga, mentioned above, cases of sexual abuse and forced child labour in mines were excluded despite the active advocacy role of national and international human rights organisations in DRC. In this case, only child combatants were recognised at the expense of other groups of children affected (Omer and Reyes-Lugardo, 2001, p.359; Graf, 2012, p.966). Omer and Reyes-Lugardo (2001, p.337) argue that the exclusion of some children and not others in the Lubanga’s case is in part explained by external economic interests in the exploitation of strategic minerals. The implementation of policies that respond to cases of child labour when different types of child labour are combined is challenging. The responses are seldom fully effective because they only respond to one ‘principal’ type of violation.

Even if the consideration of a subgroup of children depicted as the most vulnerable\textsuperscript{10} is based on noble intentions, such as the design and delivery of specific actions to help those facing exploitation, war, famine and diseases, a critical revision of the prioritisation of some situations over others is necessary. As Bodineau (2014, p.115) claims, where the phenomenon of child combatants exists, the mandates for peace and security take prevalence over the mandate for child protection. Consequentially, non-combatants become less likely to be prioritised in intervention programmes. This hierarchy of value creates additional vulnerabilities and segregation of children already classified as the most vulnerable, or what Wolock and Horowitz (1984 in Stokes and Taylor, 2014, p.394) referred to as the neglect of already neglected children. The aim of this study is not to criticise the consideration of some children as more vulnerable than others, as it is clear that children worldwide have different experiences and living conditions. Rather, this research aims to understand why

\textsuperscript{10} According to the Articles 32 and 38 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour and the UNHCR Child Protection Framework.
Child combatants are perceived as more in need than those classified as child miners even when both activities take place simultaneously, and both situations are encompassed in ‘the most vulnerable children’ category.

Child labour in mining has been seen as a separate issue that needs to be tackled through socioeconomic programs and education. Family and schooling have been the pillars of the humanitarian and development agencies who aim to address all forms of child labour (Bøås, and Boudillon 2006; Hatløy, 2008; Wells, 2009, p.95; André, 2014, p.192; Bodineau, 2014, p. 20). Therefore, narrow interpretations of the problem have led to template programming based on western ideas of schooling and family which have not taken into account cultural differences, the social construction of children and their families in regard to labour and conflict. Maconache and Hilson (2015) demonstrated how child mining in Sierra Leone is not opposed to education. Mining is the instrument that allows some children to attend school and it is also a crucial economic contribution for families. Echoing this study, Bøås and Hatløy (2008, p.17) found that 40% of the child miners surveyed (618) working in diamond mines in Sierra Leone attend school. Nonetheless, their educational achievement is lower than the country average. The actual availability of quality schooling and the lack of social mobility even if such schooling exists in the global south and war-affected areas have questioned the assumption of education as an incontestable mean of alleviating all forms of child labour.

Alongside the existent academic contributions to understand the powerful impact of the imagery of vulnerable children on the humanitarian and development discourse (Carpenter, 2005; Smith, 2009; Suski, 2009; Bornstein, 2010), it is crucial to also explain the inner categories within the subgroup of those considered ‘the most vulnerable’. The deconstruction of this subgroup of children allows understanding why, despite the humanitarian sector’s
discourse on the provision of equal protection for all who are in need
(Carpenter, 2005, p.325; Fassin, 2010, p.269) some children are regarded as more
in need than others in equally dangerous situations. As Zelizer (1985, p.45)
noted “greater numbers and visibility, however, do not necessarily transform
an issue into a social problem”. It is argued here that language, emotions, and
perceptions of risk of harm and victimhood are crucial elements that help to
construct intersubjective elements that impulse action to protect and provide
relief (Ophir, 2010, p.68).

Given that humanitarian and development response is selectively applied, even
in regard to children considered equally vulnerable and in need of protection,
analysis needs to go beyond the legal discourse, in order to explain some of the
distortions and contradictions of the child-protection framework. Such an
analysis will contribute to understanding how children are represented, why
specific groups of children are seen as more worthy of being rescued than
others, and what happens when mining and armed tasks overlap in conflict-
affected settings. Thus, it should help improve future institutional responses
towards children as they will stem from a more nuanced and comprehensive
approach.

To recapitulate, this section demonstrates that the discursive postulate of the
universal duty of care for the most vulnerable children that is present in
humanitarian and development action narratives is unequally applied even in
similar hazardous conditions and that this is due to different interpretations of
those most in need despite the legal frameworks. It has also shown that children
as a concept and icons of vulnerability and need for protection should not be
taken for granted. Child protection decision-making operates from a top-
bottom approach that confers different hierarchies of value and privilege to
some children rather than others in similar situations. This disparity aggravates
the challenging conditions of those already vulnerable. The perceived risk is heavily dependent on the existing understanding of victimhood, risk of harm, and degrees of vulnerability. However, there is still a gap in the literature that examines why some children in conflict-affected areas are particularly privileged regarding protection rather than others. The next part of the chapter outlines the analytical framework of this study.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Using Colombia as a case study, this thesis engages with a collection of concepts from sociology, anthropology, and humanitarian studies that analytically frame the research. In order to make the case that childhood, vulnerability, and work are social constructions with unique features during wartime that deserve attention, the first proposed term is ‘social age’, as suggested by Clark-Kazak (2009). Drawing on social psychology, feminist theory in development studies, and echoing the contributions made by the sociology of childhood (Eyber and Ager, 2004; Reynolds, 2004; Roshani, 2013; James and Prout, 2015), the concept of social age places children in relationships with others. According to Clark-Kazak (2009, p.1310), the concept of social age indicates “the socially constructed meanings applied to physical development and roles attributed to infants, children, young people, adults and senior adults, as well as the intra- and inter- generational relationships”. By understanding children as actors shaped by social relationships with peers and adults, instead of as isolated subjects, the issues that children face could be approached more holistically. It is central to clarify that the concept of social age aims to ‘supplement’ rather than ‘suppress’ the perspective of chronological age. Clark-Kazak (2009, p.1309) acknowledges the practicality of the use of chronological age as a measure of childhood by legal frameworks, governments and intervention agencies. Therefore, it is not realistic to expect its replacement or
elimination. Instead, development agencies could benefit from the inclusion of the social age of children to provide contextualised and appropriate interventions within specific settings. Given the stakeholders in place in mining-and conflict-affected areas, I expand the concept of social age as proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009) by including the relationships forged by children and young people with NSAGs and owners and managers of unlicensed mining sites. In adopting the theoretical construction of social age and these additional actors, it is possible to understand how local connotations of childhood have been re-framed, as well as social markers and the roles performed by children and youths within the localised reality of mining-and-conflict-affected areas.

The analysis of the power relationships where the social construction of age of children takes place also helps to explain how they make choices. In order to understand how children and young people from mining-and-conflict-affected areas operate, make decisions, and create opportunities within those constrained environments, this study draws on the theoretical contributions made by Michel De Certeau (1984) and later developments of his academic work. De Certeau (1984) offers a useful theoretical approach to analyse the actions and decisions of powerful and subjugated subjects in everyday practices. He proposes a conceptual dichotomy between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ to explain the practices of ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ of products and culture.

According to De Certeau (1984, p.xix), ‘strategies’ are linked to structures of power (i.e., a government, an enterprise, a scientific institution, a proprietor) that have the will and capacity to define spaces of navigation, specific approaches and understanding of the world, impose rules or an order, and compete with other equally powerful structures. On the other hand, ‘tactics’ relate to the clients or receivers of those institutions and structures of power.
Tactics are the actions performed by the ‘weak’ that operate in the material and psychological spaces of navigation defined by strategic actions. According to De Certeau (1984, p.ixi), tactics do not have a permanent place. They are, by nature, defensive actions that are always alert to temporary opportunities created by strategies. In brief, tactics are “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’” (Ibid).

Based on this conceptual distinction of strategies and tactics suggested by De Certeau (1984), Honwana (2005) proposes the concept of ‘tactical agency’ to explain the decisions that child combatants made in Mozambique as subaltern actors who are not in a position of power. ‘Tactical agency’ refers to a specific type of agency that is conceived to deal, create opportunities, or widen the chances within militarised and constrained environments where children navigate (Honwana, 2005, p.32). My study engages with this particular form of agency to explain, in Chapter five, how children and young people from mining-and-conflict-affected areas act, how their decisions are socially framed, and how they create opportunities within their volatile and constrained realities. The use of this analytical approach does not aim to highlight only the cases where children decide to join hazardous forms of labour. It also allows explaining why, beyond poverty, some children from the same environment reject those possibilities and use other coping mechanisms.

De Certeau’s approach also allows this study to examine the actual roles that young people and children perform in mining-and-conflict-affected areas once they are involved in activities controlled or extorted by illicit actors, including NSAGs. Vigh (2006) proposes the concept of ‘social navigation’ as the development of De Certeau’s conceptions of strategies and tactics, and the idea of ‘life chances’ of Dahrendorf (1979), with the latter understood, as the options available to individuals within a range of social limitations. Vigh (2006) developed his idea of ‘social navigation’ from the local term dubriagem used by
youths and former child combatants in Guinea Bissau. This term describes “the ability that enables one to navigate one’s way through murky socio-political circumstances as well as being the actual praxis of doing so” (Vigh, 2006, p.129).

Closely connected with the idea of ‘tactic agency’ of Honwana (2005), ‘social navigation’ implies movement within interrelated networks in unpredictable multi-layered scenarios. Likewise, it implies the use of wit and shrewdness to plan and envision actions and future outcomes, flexibility, and the capacity to adapt to “get the best out of a difficult situation” (Vigh, 2006, p.127). Navigation in this approximation is used as an analytical metaphor between social action and the particular form of movement implicit in sailing. Sailing, unlike motion on the ground or stable landscapes, implies movement across moving surfaces or ‘seascapes’. Thus, social navigation refers to movement within already volatile and wavering social environments “of actors and actants, individuals and institutions, that engage and move us as we move along” (Vigh, 2009, p.420). Since conflict-affected areas are not fixed scenarios, the metaphoric use of ‘seascapes’ instead of ‘landscapes’ in the analysis of children’s trajectories enables to account for the volatile and fluctuating nature of mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Moreover, it acknowledges both the constraints that social forces impose on children’s free movement, as well as their ability to adjust and reposition their trajectories to that “multiplicity of influences and forces” (Vigh, 2009, p.429).

Thus, the inclusion of ‘social navigation’ within ‘seascapes’ in the theoretical frame of analysis of this study allows examination of the trajectories that children and young people follow across and between the socio-political structures, rules, and networks established in the terrains where NSAGs, criminals, and mining communities operate. Although De Certeau’s theorising of strategies and tactics greatly influences the multidisciplinary analysis of the
possibilities of subaltern groups of people, the dichotomy between the strong and the weak does not take into account the constant movement and negotiation power of actors especially in volatile environments such as conflict-affected areas. Vigh (2006, p.135) recognises this simplification since actors do not always remain powerful or weak. It depends on their positionality and action. That is, an agent is “tied up in a range of power configurations in which he may be dominant in one yet weak in another, depending on which position and point of view one is seeing the world from” (Vigh, 2006, p.135). Therefore, young miners could define some rules or authority over some peers, but many of them remain in a weak position as they are not always able to be economically independent and need to be provided for by their families, or they are also immersed in workspaces controlled by external or illegal actors.

Understanding the positionality of children is, therefore, crucial to explaining their actions and decisions. I deconstruct the concept of ‘social navigation’ by identifying the roles and positions held by children and young people in the areas where I gathered data for this study. Without ignoring the complexity of their temporary actions and permanent mobility, I propose, in Chapter Six, an analytical comparative schema of their activities and working functions. This schema takes into account the method of gold extraction used, the sex of the children and young people involved, the frequency of the roles performed, as well as the transformation before and during the presence and control exercised by of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites. The working functions of children are seen in the light of a broader landscape of financial revenues used by NSAGs in Colombia.

Coupling the concepts of ‘social navigation’ and ‘tactical agency’ in the theoretical framework helps this study to approach the functioning of NSAGs and criminal actors in mining areas. Likewise, they facilitate explaining the
rationale behind the involvement of children and young people in specific tasks of the production phases of gold in rural and urban settings, including armed and unarmed working functions. I use the analysis to illustrate how the current fragmented way in which child labour in mines and the use of children for armed conflict are analysed does not allow understanding the multiple interactions, social networks, and overlapping relationships that surround the interplay and integration of various forms of child labour.

Finally, this study engages with the term ‘catastrophization’ proposed by Ophir (2010), which is complemented with the approximation to humanitarianism proposed by Suski (2009, p.2010) as an “emotion-based impulse”. Catastrophization, initially adopted from cognitive psychology and psychiatry, is conceptualised by Ophir (2010, p.64) as:

[a] way to describe a state of affairs so as to make what has been a ‘tolerable’ or ‘normal’ situation seem too dangerous or intolerable, to arouse moral and political reactions, and to mobilize assistance. The described process, which has been naturalized or normalized before now, appears as either exceptional or as bearing potentially exceptional consequences.

The functionality of the use of catastrophization in this research is two-fold. One, it helps to explain why the use of children for armed conflict is seen as more severe and morally urgent than child labour in extractive economies, even when both situations are interrelated. Two, this concept contributes to determining how the imaginary threshold between a tolerable situation and an intolerable one, involving the most vulnerable children, is defined. Two planes are interrelated on the idea of catastrophization. One ‘objective’ and visible, for instance, the existence of armed conflict, an epidemic or a natural disaster. And the other ‘discursive’ that is used to legitimise the urgency of specific situations,
mitigate their effects, or suspend the threat as a useful tool for control or cooperation (Ophir, 2010, p.66).

The examination of humanitarian action through the lens of emotional impulse – that is, the subjective elements that inform the actions of practitioners during an emergency – helps to understand the discursive plane of catastrophization. Thus, examination of this discursive plane and the feelings of child protection practitioners supports a holistic understanding of the different factors that interplay in failing to protect children involved in hazardous forms of labour amid natural resource conflicts, despite the legal frameworks that render these as catastrophic situations.

According to Suski (2009, p.210), sympathy, empathy, compassion and even guilt could characterise the emotional base of humanitarianism. As such, “the emotional pull of humanitarian appeals is always dependent upon the worthiness of those suffering, and constructions of the morality of sufferers shifts in different historical and social contexts” (ibid). Therefore, as discussed in Section 2.3, despite the universal claims of the humanitarian narrative, actions to protect and relieve people in need have not been evenly carried out since they rely on how those in need are constructed. The theoretical postulates of Suski (2009) point to images, narratives and personal feelings as central drivers of the ways vulnerable children are represented, sentimentalised, and subsequently protected or neglected. I complement this ‘emotion-based’ characterisation of humanitarianism by including the positionality of local officials as an additional central element to understand why some children are prevented of being seen as worthy enough to be ‘saved’ amid resource-fuelled conflicts.
Using Ophir and Suski’s theoretical approaches, I discuss in Chapter Seven the contradictions and ambivalences in the implementation of child protection policies towards children in mining settings. Moreover, I question the intersubjective practices of officials and the specific representations of children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas which are significantly informed by hierarchies of value, emotions, and imagery of children. These particular representations and discourses lead to action or inaction depending on the construction of meaning about these particular subjects.

Considering that this research is undertaking the analysis of diverse tasks during wartime, as well as related social representations, the concepts of ‘catastrophization’ and ‘emotion-based impulses’ significantly aid explanation of how the situation of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas is currently perceived and why the institutional response has been provided in a dispersed manner. In doing so, this research contributes to deconstructing the relationship between armed conflicts and different types of child labour, as well as providing some insight into the factors that intervene in recognition of changeable ‘intolerable affairs’ within protracted conflicts. Understanding the intersubjective preferences that drive government officials, as well as humanitarian and development practitioners, in the response to the most vulnerable, contributes to a revision of current conceptualisations and understandings of the discourse of vulnerability, agency and protection of children.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter has called for a re-examination of the universal duty of protection in regard to the most vulnerable children, the forced character of hazardous forms labour, and the interaction of different types of child labour in wartime.
The common misconception of child labourers in mines as inherently vulnerable and passive beings with no childhood oversimplifies the interpretation of their experiences. It does not take into account the existing nuances of the participation of children in various forms of labour, particularly during an armed conflict. This study considers labour and armed conflict as social practices that are not necessarily opposed to childhood. Conversely, it is argued here that childhood is not a static category. It is defined and redefined in each cultural context where labour and conflict could be present elements. Prevailing views do not allow a broader understanding of the multiple relationships and actors that intervene in local constructions of childhood, as well as the multiple agencies that are performed in constrained environments such as mining-and-conflict-affected areas. In awareness of the differences in childhoods, children are considered in this study as active agents with the capacity of choice. Poverty and deprivation are not necessarily binding conditions that invalidate their choices.

The chapter has argued for a better definition and explanation of the working functions of children in the service of NSAGs. Academic studies have so far only briefly mentioned the non-violent roles performed by children during armed conflict as activities that usually take place in conjunction with armed tasks. Consequently, the existence of children who are associated with NSAGs but who have never been in the frontline and who perform only unarmed roles has not been deeply studied, especially in regard to extractive economies. The inclusion of a more comprehensive understanding of the interlinked and overlapping roles performed by children helps to uncover the collection of unarmed tasks children carry out, which are equally crucial for NSAGs. The increasing number of armed conflicts fuelled and funded by natural resources where children constitute the workforce necessitates alternative analysis that
challenges analytical conceptions of child labour in legal and illegal economies as well as the non-combatant roles of children in conflict.

Current approaches towards the ‘most vulnerable children’ have helped to create stereotypical and generalising ideas of victimhood and vulnerability while providing scant analysis of the emotional impulses and subjective factors that have driven child protection decision-making. This chapter also revealed that child protection actions involve political and subjective considerations that give more value and urgency to those recognised as ‘child combatants’ than those classified within the broad category of ‘child labour in hazardous conditions’. This is the case even when both activities take place in the same area at the same time. While some of the literature acknowledges the existence of privileged attention paid by agencies and social workers to some groups of children over others, this imbalance in responses towards the so-called most vulnerable children has not been fully explored. This chapter, therefore, calls for the analysis of hierarchies of value and discursive representations of extractive industries, children and NSAGs.

Having identified the gaps in the analysis of the use of children in armed conflict and child labour in hazard conditions, I introduced the theoretical grounding of analysis. This study is analytically framed by a multidisciplinary collection of concepts to explain social constructions of childhood, the tactics used by children to exert agency and navigate their constrained realities, and intersubjective representation that drive institutional action and inaction towards those children. I conclude this chapter by stressing the importance of recognising the urgent need to acknowledge and study the particular experience of children immersed in conflicts where natural resources play a pivotal function. By understanding the interplay of categories and by deconstructing child labour in mines, a more nuanced and more accurate
picture of current conflicts is provided. The following chapter describes the
general context of the Colombian armed conflict and the specific involvement of
NSAGs in extractive economies.
CHAPTER 3

Colombia, armed conflict and ‘illegal’ gold mining

Context of the research study

Introduction

In order to understand how forms of hazardous work frame the experiences of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, it is essential to contextualise their positions and realities within a broader landscape. This chapter examines some of the historical events and political/economic factors that have shaped mineral resource-fuelled conflicts in Colombia. To do so, it positions this research through three interconnected sections. The first introduces the country and provides an overview of the causes, stages and main actors involved in this long-lasting conflict. The focus is the historical dispute between armed actors for the control and extortion of natural resources and the factors that came together to make gold an attractive source of their revenue in the last decade. The following section examines the blurred borderline between what could be considered as ‘legal’ and ‘illegal,’ given the outspread informality of the mining sector in Colombia, the strategies used by NSAGs to profit from gold, and the governmental actions to counteract this shadow economy. The third section discusses how NSAGs and outside investors and miners have specifically profited from unlicensed gold mining in Chocó and why this is an appropriate case study to analyse hazardous forms of child labour. Finally, this chapter draws some conclusions about what this means for the study of children in this region and context.
3.1 Background of the resource-fuelled conflicts in Colombia

Colombia has faced one of the more prolonged and complex internal armed conflicts of the world. Although rivalries over the control of natural resources have become a central part of the history of the Colombian conflict, it would be inaccurate to assert that these are its main explanation. This is an armed conflict grounded in a political agenda during which, over time, natural resources and illicit drugs became central financial revenues for NSAGs and criminal organisations (Collier, 2010, p.1111; Massé, 2016, p.260). This section provides a condensed analysis of the origins, stages and actors involved in the Colombian armed conflict, all of which have served as a foundation for the contemporary disputes driven by extractive economies. By doing this, it is possible to frame this study within the broader landscape of Colombian history.

Due to the historical violence involved, there is not yet an agreement between historians and social scientists about the specific starting point of the Colombian armed conflict. However, there is, more or less, an agreement regarding the root causes of this conflict, which can be traced back to two main historical periods. The first one is the bipartisan civil conflict between conservatives and liberals, which started during the nineteenth century in rural areas (see Johnson, 1995; Sánchez and Aguilera, 2001), and escalated in the twentieth century reaching its worst point between 1946 and 1960. Historians labelled this period as ‘The Violence’ due to the perpetration of cruel acts by radicalised peasant self-defence groups which were created as a reaction to the political violence. Almost 200,000 people were assassinated during The Violence (Pécaut, 2009, p.36).

The second period is known as the ‘National Front’ (1958-1974), during which the Conservative and the Liberal parties agreed to rotate power every presidential term to reduce the wave of violence between people affiliated to these political parties. However, during the National Front, alternative political
forces were excluded and the inequality in distribution of land increased. In
response, former communist self-defence groups evolved into guerrilla groups
such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-
EP)\textsuperscript{11} in 1964; the National Liberation Army (ELN)\textsuperscript{12} in 1965; and the Popular
Liberation Army (EPL)\textsuperscript{13} in 1967 (GMH, 2013, p.123). Thus, the previous
bipartisan violence was transformed during the 1960s into a subversive conflict
which remains until today.

Drawing on the work of the Historical Memory Group (GMH) (2013), it is
possible to argue that the Colombian armed conflict has evolved in five stages.
Examining how each phase of the conflict has developed is central to
understanding how mineral resources emerged as a financial lifeline of NSAGs
and how current characteristics of the conflict in mining areas frame the lived
experiences of children. The first stage (1958-1982) was characterised by the
already mentioned transformation of bipartisan violence into insurgent
conflict.\textsuperscript{14} The second stage took place between 1982 and 1996. During this
stage, the Colombian government made various peace negotiation attempts to
demobilise NSAGs. Some left-wing guerrilla groups agreed to demobilise after
concerting the reform of the National Constitution, requesting their recognition
as legitimate political actors, and creating participation mechanisms for
excluded political parties (Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, 2019).\textsuperscript{15}

However, the ELN and FARC-EP did not demobilise due to the constant
breaches of the peace accords signed by the Colombian government and other
NSAGs, the absence of guarantees for the political participation of the

\textsuperscript{11} Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo.
\textsuperscript{12} Ejército de Liberación Nacional.
\textsuperscript{13} Ejército Popular de Liberación.
\textsuperscript{14} The guerrilla group, 19\textsuperscript{th} of April Movement (M-19), was created during this period (1970) and
was demobilised in 1990.
\textsuperscript{15} In 1984 indigenes from Cauca founded the Quintin Lame Armed Movement (MAQL). This
guerrilla group remained active until 1991 (Peñaranda Supelano, 2010, p.42). Likewise, the
People’s Revolutionary Army, a faction of the ELN, was founded in 1985 and remained active
until 2007 (Bonilla, Cardona and Rodriguez, 2013, p.77).
opposition, and the recurrent attacks of civilians perpetrated by these armed groups. Indeed, both the ELN and FARC-EP were politically and militarily strengthened, and expanded their territorial control (GMH, 2013, p.111). Consequently, right-wing paramilitary groups were created in rural areas to counteract guerrilla movements. These groups were initially supported by cattlemen, local elites and unofficially by the State (Kalyvas and Arjona, 2005, p.29; Hristov, 2010, p.15; GMH, 2013, p.156). On the other hand, drug trafficking expanded and the dispute between drug cartels increased since narcotics also became one of the principal sources of finance of paramilitary and guerrilla groups (Winer and Roule, 2003, p.204; Aguilera Peña, 2010, p.95).

Although the disputes around the control of natural resources were not linked to the beginning of the Colombian conflict, as discussed above, during this period subsoil resources started to become drivers of the reconfiguration and intensification of the levels of violence in the country (Gutiérrez and Barón, 2008). In the specific case of the hydrocarbon industry, all NSAGs profited from the extortion, attack and illegal capturing of royalties (FIP, 2015a, p.2). However, the ELN is the NSAG which has profited the most, both economically and politically, from military attacks on oil facilities and the kidnappings, assaults and extortions of employees of oil companies since the mid-1980s until the present day (Pearce, 2007, p.227).

All these elements combined became the foundation of the third stage of the conflict (1996-2005), which so far has been one of the most violent periods of the history of Colombia (see Gaviria, 2000; Holmes et al., 2006, p.162). This period was characterised by the expansion and strength of guerrilla groups, paramilitary forces and their increased control over the cultivation, production and traffic of narcotics. However, during this period, Colombia also faced international pressure framed on the War on Drugs and the Antiterrorist War
against guerrilla groups financed by drugs (Bibes, 2001, p.45). Furthermore, alongside illicit crops and oil, NSAGs and criminal organisations started to benefit from the extortion and violent control over the exploitation of gold (Ross, 2004, p.48). Although during the seventies and eighties, drug cartels laundered money through the gold trade, NSAGs did not become interested in this mineral until the 2000s. Besides the increase in international gold prices, this mineral represented a legal asset with no traceability compared to illicit drugs. Therefore, it offered fewer trade risks, better financial opportunities, and better possibilities to launder drug-related money (Massé, 2016, p.260; FIP, 2015b, p.6). This initial interest in gold would reach its peak in the following stage of the conflict.

The fourth phase of the conflict took place between 2005 and 2012. During this period, the military capacity of the Colombian government improved, and FARC-EP and other guerrilla groups were weakened (GMH, 2013, p.111). During this period, most paramilitary forces were demobilised, but factions of those structures rearmed and created other organisations, which were loosely labelled as criminal bands (BACRIM) by the Colombian government (Ministry of Defence, 2011). The BACRIM were not recognised as legitimate parts of the internal conflict despite their resemblance to other NSAGs, the high-intensity of the armed confrontations between them and the military forces, the threat and violence inflicted on civilians, and their hierarchical internal organisation (López López, 2015). These BACRIM were aligned with criminal activities and strongly permeated by the narcotics industry (Hristov, 2010, p.20; Human Rights Watch, 2010). As such, it is not possible to judge and prosecute their crimes under the International Humanitarian Law. As analysed in Chapter Seven, the lack of recognition of BACRIM as part of the Colombian conflict has direct consequences on how children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas are represented and protected, as well as on how military forces undertake actions
to tackle unlicensed mining in which NSAGs and criminal organisations are involved.

Moreover, during the first decade of the 2000s, with the rise of the international price of commodities such as oil, coal and gold, the extractive sector experienced a dramatic boom. The price per gram of gold went from COP\textsuperscript{16} 46,000 in 2007 (£300 oz.) to COP 94,000 in 2011 (£900 oz.) (Idrobo, Mejia and Tribín, 2104, p.85).\textsuperscript{17} In 2012, the price per ounce reached its highest peak (£1200 oz.) (See Graph 1, below). Therefore, between 2008 and 2015 the production of gold in Colombia increased by 28.2%, reaching the production of just over 59 million tons of gold in 2015 (Pérez, 2017, p.58). It has been estimated that almost 80% of national gold is produced in the departments of Antioquia and Chocó (Massé, 2016, p.270). Given the increase in the price of mineral commodities, the national government came to consider the mining and energy sector as a “central axis for the Colombian economy” (Rivas and Echeverri, 2012, p.14). This trend, however, has slightly changed during the most recent period of the conflict.

\textsuperscript{16} Colombian Peso.
\textsuperscript{17} Precious materials are weighed using the ‘Troy ounce’ as a unit of measure. 31.1 gram of gold equals 1 troy ounce.
Graph 1. International gold price in GBP\textsuperscript{18} per ounce from 2000 to 2017.

![Gold Price Chart](goldprice.org)

\textbf{Source:} (Gold Price, 2019)

Two trends have characterised the current stage of the conflict (2012-onwards). On the one hand, there are the effects of the peace accord signed between FARC-EP and the Colombian government in 2016 after four years of negotiations (Gobierno de la República de Colombia and FARC-EP, 2016). On the other hand, the continued armed action of other NSAGs constitutes the second trend. In 2016, the Ministry of Defence of Colombia re-classified the BACRIM into Organised Crime Groups (GDO) and Organised Armed Groups (GAO) depending on their military capacity, level or organisation and the scope of their actions (Ministry of Defence of Colombia, 2016).\textsuperscript{19} This re-classification further obscures how working children and their roles are represented and how humanitarian aid is delivered. Moreover, NGOs and think tanks have argued that this new categorisation enables the Colombian government to eliminate any possible accusation of war crimes in cases where excessive force is used, as well as to disregard any possible recognition of the political status of those

\textsuperscript{18} Great British Pounds (Sterling).

\textsuperscript{19} The GDOs are smaller organisations with less military capacity than GAO and mainly countered by the police. The GAOs are larger organisations, with territorial control and a considerable military capacity which is countered by both the police and the army (Ministry of Defence of Colombia, 2016).
groups (see ACPAZ and INDEPAZ, 2016; Tabory, 2016). Furthermore, the ELN is still active; and disputes with other NSAGs and criminal organisations over control of areas previously controlled by FARC-EP, including mining zones, have proliferated.

In 2015, the Colombian government estimated that, in some areas, gold mining replaced drug trafficking, from which illegal actors earn around COP 7.1 billion a year (Presidencia de la República, 2015). However, as Pérez (2017, p.60) points out, from 2014 the economic growth of the gold sector has stabilised, primarily due to the fall in the international price of gold between 2013 and 2015, which barely reached the 2010 price (See Graph 2).

**Graph 2.** International gold price in GBP per ounce from 2010 to April 2019.

![Graph 2](image)

In sum, the Colombian internal armed conflict has evolved in five identifiable phases in which resource-fuelled conflicts and criminal networks have “developed under its auspices” (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016, p.82).
Paramilitary, guerrilla groups and organised crime organisations have controlled, extorted and profited from illicit drugs, oil, and gold during the last three decades to secure their military operations against the civilian population and the military forces. It has been estimated that, between 1985 and March 2019, the Colombian conflict has created around 8.5 million victims of which almost 7.5 million have been internally displaced, approximately one million people have been assassinated, and almost 37,000 people have been kidnapped (UARIV, 2019). It is in this context of violence and the effects of illicit extractive economies that this study is situated. In the next section, I discuss in more detail the classifications regarding the illegal extraction of minerals given that not all non-legalised mining sites are at the service of armed organisations. Likewise, I examine how NSAGs have profited from gold and how governmental authorities have counteracted their actions.

3.2 Gold mining within the ‘criminal portfolios’ of NSAGs

In Colombia, informality and criminality have merged within the gold mining sector. Despite the fact that gold is not the most important commodity in macroeconomic terms since it only represents 5% of the total mining production of the country, in 2012 the export of gold gave Colombia US$2.5 billion (Massé, 2016, p.269). However, gold has not been fully exploited in legalised mines. The widespread informality that has characterised the mining sector in Colombia has created a shadow economy in which not only NSAGs but also artisanal and informal miners are immersed. According to a census of mining activities conducted in 2011 by the Ministry of Mines and Energy, there are 4,134 gold mines in Colombia of which 86.7% (3,584) do not have a mining title. Therefore,

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20 Even though the Colombian internal conflict started during the 1950s, governmental databases have registered denouncements from victims only from 1985 onwards. The establishment of a specific date for the registry of cases was a decision made in the frame of the application of the Law 1448/ 2011, also known as the Victims Law.
in agreement with mining legislation,\textsuperscript{21} those mining sites are considered illegal (Ministerio de Minas y Energía de Colombia, 2012, p.14).

However, the differentiation of the gold mining sector between legal and illegal oversimplifies the complexity of extractive economies in conflict-affected areas. The participation and control exerted by NSAGs and criminal organisations in the exploitation of gold calls for a deconstruction of what can be considered illegal. Moreover, current legislation does not “differentiate on aspects regarding economic capacity, size of the mining area, human resources or technology level” (Sarmiento \textit{et al.}, 2013, p.53). Deconstructing illegality within the mining sector is central to this study for two reasons: Firstly, to understand the complexity of mining-and-conflict-affected areas, and, secondly, to frame the experiences of children and young people examined in this study.

Although categorising gold mining practices is complicated due to its overlaps and blurred borderlines, the classification offered by the NGO \textit{Foro Nacional por Colombia} (2016) sheds light on the interlinked nature of mining practices in conflict-affected areas. Moreover, it incorporates the categorisations proposed by various scholars (e.g. Echavarria, 2014; Massé, 2016; Tierra Digna, 2016, p.21-23). Thus, according to \textit{Foro Nacional por Colombia} (2016, p.240), four types of mining overlap within the non-legalised gold mining sector: \textit{Barequeo}, informal mining, grey mining, and illegal mining (see Chart 1).

Barequeo is a colloquial term used to refer to traditional ASGM. As such, this is an ancestral and subsistence activity performed by Afro-Colombians and some indigenous peoples, which relies on rustic hand-held tools (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.21). However, the gold price boom experienced during the first decade of the 2000s led to an increase in the mechanisation of gold, and most artisanal mining sites have been destroyed. Therefore, some traditional miners or barequeros, as they are locally known, have generally either had to migrate to informal mining or to mutate their practices. In other cases, they have had to work using their rustic tools in backhoes-opened shafts at semi- and fully mechanised sites that have been abandoned in the quest to find leftovers of gold [see Photograph 1]. National authorities labelled this practice as “ASGM in machines” [barequeo de máquina] (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2012, p.93).
‘Informal mining’ refers to small and medium-sized exploitation units which do not have an environmental license, a mining title or accounting records. Likewise, it refers to mining sites with “generally poor environmental, technical, health and safety, employment and trading conditions” (Echavarria, 2014, p.147). Nonetheless, this group also includes traditional miners who are currently carrying out formalisation or legalisation procedures for their mines (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.23). It is vital to note that legalisation initiatives have not succeeded in part because of a pervasive culture of informality and the “lack of capacity building and [other] cumbersome requirements” (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.53).

On the other hand, ‘Grey Mining’ is characterised by absolute informality, connivance with illegal actors, use of dangerous chemicals such as mercury or cyanide to separate gold from lighter sediments, and high levels of corruption among some civil servants and authorities (Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2016, p.243). Within this form of mining, some traditional miners make alliances with junior companies or outside investors (entrepreneurs), which own machinery to increase their productivity. Lastly, the direct and indirect involvement of
NSAGs and criminal organisations in mining activities are labelled in Chart 1 as ‘illegal mining’. However, some governmental entities and scholars have suggested that this type of mining is better described by the label ‘criminal mining’ since it has contributed to human rights violations, money laundering, and social conflict (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2012; Echavarria, 2014; Tierra Digna, 2016). The national police estimated that at least 20% of FARC-EP’s finances came from the illegal exploitation of gold (Massé and Camargo, 2012, p.7).

The lack of differentiation between mining without a license and the one in the service of NSAGs has triggered armed and social disputes as well as leading to the stigmatisation of traditional miners, the confiscation of gold and supplies, and the indiscriminate destruction of machinery by the police (Echavarría, 2014, p.8; Pérez, 2017, p.63). From 2014 and 2016, the National Unit against Illegal Mining and Antiterrorism (UNIMIL) undertook 2,057 military operations against illegal mining in which 10,743 people were arrested, 477 machines were destroyed, 1,308.6 kg of mercury were seized, and 931.7 kg of gold were confiscated (UNIMIL, 2016). In contrast, NSAGs, mafia groups, and mining entrepreneurs in some areas have capitalised on the blurred legal lines between informal and traditional practices of mining (barequeo) by rendering themselves as ASGM miners. By using this artificial identity, these actors have been able to buy machinery, reduce legal prosecutions, and exploit mines on a larger scale (Fundación Renacer, 2015, p.16).

According to UNIMIL (2016), in 2016 a total of 229 municipalities located in 25 departments of Colombia were affected by the illicit extraction of minerals such as gold, silver and charcoal, as well as construction materials. As the ochre

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22 UNIMIL is an interinstitutional unit created in 2014 and lead by the National Police of Colombia.

23 The destroyed machinery includes backhoes, bulldozers, motor-driven pumps and dredgers.

24 Colombia is administratively divided into 1,101 municipalities grouped into 32 departments.
areas in Map 1 show, some regions (30%) where the unlicensed extraction of minerals takes place are not under the control of NSAGs or criminal organisations. The blue dots identify the areas controlled by the ELN whereas the blue spots point out the territory controlled by organised crime organisations. It is essential to clarify that even though FARC-EP was one of the main NSAGs that extorted and exploited gold in Colombia, its control and influence is not shown by UNIMIL in Map 1, due to the map dating from after the demobilisation and disarmament process undertaken by this armed group between 2012 and 2016.
The Colombian government and some media have claimed that gold has replaced narcotics as the primary financial revenue of NSAGs (Presidencia de la República, 2015; Fajardo, 2017). However, this assertion has been scrutinised by various scholars who argue that NSAGs and criminal organisations have combined both activities and other illegal markets in their attempt to diversify their sources of finance (Idrobo, Mejia and Tribín, 2014, p.90; Pérez, 2017, p.63). Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo (2016, p.83) propose the concept of “criminal resource portfolio” to refer to the simultaneous participation of criminal
organisations and NSAGs in the extraction of legal (e.g., gold mining) and illegal (e.g., drug trafficking) resources to finance their activities. In the case of Colombia, this participation is economically and politically conditioned. Factors such as the international price of gold and the reputational cost of some activities (i.e., kidnappings) have influenced the preference of some economic activities over others (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016, p.88). Framing the involvement of NSAGs in gold mining in Colombia within the notion of ‘portfolios’ allows an understanding that the social navigation of children within the areas where I conducted this study is not restricted to gold mining. Rather, the extraction of gold is only one activity within a collection of other economic activities managed and controlled by illegal actors.

NSAGs have profited from gold through multiple methods. These include the extortion and sabotage of mining companies, the management and operation of mining sites, the establishment of security payments, the use of drug-related money to buy machinery or supplies, and the use of legalised mines to launder their profits from drug trafficking (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016, p.91). Similarly, illicit actors have benefited from the illegal capturing of royalties, rental of confiscated machinery, pressure on ASGM miners, the establishment of gold trading companies, and the ownership of mining sites through ‘straw men’ (ABColombia, CINEP and Tierra Digna, 2015, p.13; Massé, 2016, p.262).

In other cases, the connections between “organised crime and global capitalism” are evident (Wells, 2009, p.149). Criminal organisations have established sophisticated mechanisms of extraction and trading that include the use of legitimate international trading companies operating in other countries, as well as the use of façade companies to buy gold in third countries at a lower price to later sell it internally (Bolaños, 2016). As Massé (2016, p. 261) argues, Colombia has a unique characteristic since in no other country is there such as
an explosive and close relationship between armed conflict, gold production, and drug trafficking.

The mining classifications, explained above, help to contextualise this study by analytically illustrating the existing nuances within the unlicensed mining of gold. The experiences of children and young people, examined in the following chapters of this thesis, are situated within the complex junction between barequeo, grey mining and criminal mining. However, the participants from mining-and-conflict-affected areas of this study never referred to their practices as informal, illegal, grey or criminal, even in the cases where NSAGs and other illicit actors were involved.

Conversely, participants paid particular attention to the type of technology used at mine sites. Therefore, to reflect the roles and experiences of children and young people as faithfully as possible, the analysis is carried out focusing on ASGM, semi-mechanised and fully mechanised mining, to which I generally refer to as ‘non-legalised’ or as ‘unlicensed’. This study acknowledges the analytical nuances of illegality within gold mining, but it does not aim to criminalise all mining practices since, as mentioned above, not all illegal mining sites are in the service of NSAGs. In the following section, I examine how NSAGs and other illicit actors have explicitly benefited from the unlicensed extraction of gold in Chocó. Furthermore, I explain why this is a pertinent case study to explore the lived experiences of children involved in hazardous forms of work.

3.3 Mining and armed conflict in Chocó: The case study

Chocó, shown in Map 2, is located on the west of Colombia and is composed of thirty municipalities. This department is situated in a privileged geographical position bounded by the Panama Canal, and the Pacific and the Atlantic coasts. Chocó has an area of 46,530 km² and a population of 500,093 inhabitants of
which 48.7% (243,910) are under the age of nineteen (DANE, 2015). As such, Chocó is the department with the highest proportion of children in the country. The primary demographic is made up of Afro-descendants (82.1%), four indigenous groups (12.7%), and *mestizos* or people without any ethnic affiliation (5.2%) (DANE, 2005, p.30).

**Map 2.** Political-administrative division of Chocó.

Chocó has been cited as one of the most biodiverse regions of the world; however, it is at the same time the poorest region of Colombia. National authorities calculated that in 2016 Colombia’s extreme poverty index was at 8.5%, while in Chocó it was at 34.7% (DANE, 2017a, p.6). The non-literacy rate

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25 The total population of Colombia is 48,203,405 inhabitants (DANE, 2015).
26 The indigenous communities that inhabit Chocó are the Embera, Embera Chami, Embera Katio, Tule and Waunan; these are organised into 115 indigenous reserves (DANE, 2007, p.21).
is twice and a half times higher (20.9%) than the national rate (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014b, p.112). Likewise, the mortality rate of children under five has also been estimated as one of the highest in the country. In 2005, almost 60% of children in Chocó under the age of five were malnourished, compared to the national average of 33% (SGDF, 2017, p.2).

The geostrategic position of Chocó and its large reserves of natural resources have turned this area into one of the departments most affected by armed conflict. Violence inflicted by the State and by NSAGs has developed around the internal conflict and the establishment of illegal economies such as drug trafficking, smuggling and logging, as well as unlicensed gold extraction (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014a, p.7). According to the Unit for Victims’ Assistance and Reparation of Colombia (UARIV),27 the governmental institution in charge of the registration and compensation of victims of the internal conflict, between January 1985 and April 2019 approximately 423,587 people were internally displaced in Chocó, 3,006 people were assassinated, at least 758 people were forcibly disappeared, and about 329 children were recruited as combatants by NSAGs (UARIV, 2019). It is important to note that NSAGs and criminal organisations have operated differently in mining areas and their presence in Chocó did not originate in the same regions, nor at the same time.

In particular, NSAGs such as the paramilitary groups (or blocs) of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) entered Chocó in the mid-1990s aiming to control mine sites, strategic trade routes and corridors for drug and arms trafficking (OECD, 2017, p.14). In addition, the AUC also sought to benefit from the oil palm industry. These pro-government paramilitary forces forged alliances with oil palm entrepreneurs to extend this agro-industrial activity in Chocó through the displacement and murder of Afro-Colombian communities.

27 Unidad para la Atención y Reparación Integral a las Víctimas de Colombia.
(Verdad Abierta, 2013). Three of the AUC’s blocs operated in this department. The Chocó Bloc started to operate in Quibdó, whereas the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc entered through the department of Antioquia towards the municipality of Riosucio (FIP, 2015b, p.29). In 2002, the AUC created the Pacific-Heroes of Chocó Bloc which operated in the south of the department.28 After the partial demobilisation of paramilitary groups between 2003 and 2006, the proliferation of criminal organisations started,29 as well as their direct participation and control over gold mines (Massé and Camargo, 2012, p.11). According to Tierra Digna (2016, p.43), paramilitary groups and associated dissidents put pressure – through threats, assaults and intimidations – on leaders of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities to allow illicit crops and mechanised mining in their territories. Moreover, these NSAGs fractured social organisations and co-opted members of local authorities in mining villages; this also became coupled with other serious violations of human rights including the recruitment of children as hitmen and extortionists in mining areas.

On the other hand, FARC and the ELN have also operated in Chocó aiming to counteract the control exerted by paramilitary forces and seeking to exert control over drug trafficking routes and gold revenues. According to the General Police Inspector, in 2015 was estimated that between 10% and 20% of mine sites were directly owned by guerrilla groups (ABColombia, CINEP and Tierra Digna, 2015, p.12). The Ernesto Che Guevara30 and Hernán Jaramillo fronts of the ELN entered the southwest of Chocó in 1987. Initially, the ELN undertook an arduous political intervention aiming to strengthen their social base, which was however later exterminated by paramilitary forces (MOE and Corporación Nuevo Arco Iris, 2007, p.11). From 2002, the ELN has expanded to other regions of Chocó including mining areas through two military fronts: The

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28 This paramilitary bloc operated between 2002 and 2005 in Istmina, Condoto, Lloró, Novita, Tado, San José del Palma, Quibdó, Sipí, Alto, Medio and Bajo Baudó (Verdad Abierta, 2009)
29 These included Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, Urabeños, Rastrojos and Clan del Golfo.
30 This front currently operates in the Itsmina, Lloró, El Carmen and Tadó.
Manuel El Boche Front, which operates in Quibdó, Lloró, Certegui, Bagadó, Tadó and Carmen de Atrato, and the Resistencia Cimarrón Front, which operates in Cantón de San Pablo, Río Quito and Unión Panamericana (FIP, 2015, p.28). In these areas, the ELN has controlled the legal and unlicensed extraction of gold using threats, extortions and the kidnapping of miners and gold traders. Additionally, this guerrilla group has recruited children, planted antipersonnel mines and undertaken military counterattacks on criminal organisations and the military forces (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.43).

The FARC-EP arrived in Chocó in 1985 when a section of the V Front, which operated in Antioquia, created the 34 Front. This structure initially operated in Riosucio and later expanded to other municipalities including mining areas in Medio Atrato (FIP, 2015, p.26). Alongside the 34 Front, FARC-EP militarily operated in Chocó until 2015 through other three military structures: the 57 Front, the 30 Front and the Libardo García del Arturo Ruíz Movil Column. The 57 Front operated between Acandi and Quibdó and was one of the structures that undertook most military operations against the paramilitary forces, which in several occasions were supported by the military forces. One of the most dramatic operations took place in 2002 in Bojayá when, during an intense armed confrontation between the 57 front and the Elmer Cárdenas AUC-Bloc, 79 civilians were killed when a homemade mortar was thrown into a church where they had taken shelter (GMH, 2010, p.13). The 30 Front operated in Sipí and the mining area of Itsmina, while the Libardo García del Arturo Ruíz Movil Column was present in Tadó and San José del Palmar (FIP, 2015, p.28).

According to Tierra Digna (2016, p.43), FARC-EP recruited children and young people in mining areas as a pressure mechanism exerted over local communities to influence their decisions regarding mining and logging. Likewise, FARC-EP used urban militiamen to control, extort and monitor
economic transactions of unlicensed mining. However, this research thesis also found that in areas such as Bebarama in Medio Atrato, FARC-EP had close relationships with the local communities. The guerrilla group also supported local initiatives to create cooperatives of artisanal miners, built schools and organised sports tournaments. Meanwhile, it not only extorted resources and/or money from the owners of backhoes or from mining entrepreneurs, but also imposed regulations to minimise the environmental impacts of mining. During meetings organised by FARC-EP in mining sites, as I explain in Chapter Five, it was common for community members, including children and adolescents, to receive political and ideological training.

As Le Billon (2001, p.569) and Laudati (2013, p.41) argue, in the pillage of natural resources by illegal actors, including NSAGs, grassroots interconnections and local legitimacy are critical. The introduction of big machinery into Chocó was possible due to alliances and payment arrangements between NSAGs and some community councils, the corruption of governmental authorities, and infrastructure and services provided for local communities by NSAGs. Consequently, mechanised forms of mining blurred the line between artisanal and semi-mechanised mining and undermined local authorities and the social tissue of many communities. Local regulations established by community councils concerning mining, such as those relating to environmental protection, fees and decision-making, have been mostly ignored by foreign miners and those who run industrialised forms of mining (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.54). Moreover, due to the presence of various criminal organisations in mining areas, some mining entrepreneurs have created private security groups, which makes security conditions more complex (Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2016, p.136).
It is relevant to mention that mining communities have developed different relationships with NSAGs and not all of them agree with or support their presence in their territories. The transition from ASGM to a more industrialised form has not been smooth, and many communities still put up resistance to the control exerted by outsiders and NSAGs. Security conditions have been compromised, and new rules and restrictions have been set through intimidation and armed actions (Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2016, p.167). As one of the leaders from Rio Quito asserted during an informal conversation:

[…] where the paramilitaries are, it is very difficult! One has to deal with those people [NSAGs] and the only option for us is to adapt ourselves, so as not to been displaced. We have to adapt to the system they implement because they are the ones who use weapons, so people have to keep quiet to stay there.\(^\text{31}\)

Therefore, ASGM miners and informal miners are continually facing stigmatisation and, in response, attempting to demonstrate that not all of them are involved with NSAGs (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.51). Sometimes, they attempt to do this by formalising their work. However, as mentioned in Section 3.2, formalisation procedures are cumbersome, unattractive and even dangerous, since some miners have been threatened and expelled from their mines once they submitted their formalisation request to the mining authorities (Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2016, p.149).

Unlike other mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Colombia, the Afro-descent communities of Chocó have been ancestrally attached to gold mining since the 16\(^{th}\) century when Spanish colonisers brought Africans as a slave workforce for the gold mines (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.47). As such, Afro-Colombians, similarly to indigenous peoples, are considered in the National Constitution as an important ethnic minority and collective owners of the land. Given the fact that these ethnic groups are a majority in Chocó, they do not refer to themselves

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\(^{31}\) Informal conversation, leader Rio Quito, May 2107 [Author’s translation].
as a ‘minority’ but as ‘ethnic communities’. Afro-Colombian communities have been organised in administrative authorities called Consejos Comunitarios [community councils] since 1993. Law 70/1993 and Decree 1745/1995 recognised and regulated this form of organisation that allows Afro-descendants to make decisions over their territories collectively, as well as protect and defend their ethnic rights. Although Afro-Colombians technically have stewardship over natural resources, in practice, there are various legal loopholes of which national authorities, multinational corporations and illicit actors have taken advantage.

Mining authorities have delimited sixteen areas for ethnic communities in Chocó, fifteen of which (covering 310,920 hectares) have been allocated to Afro-Colombian communities (OECD, 2017, p.9). However, the autonomy and self-determination of ethnic communities have been curtailed by violence, as explained above, as well as some legal niceties. For instance, Article 332 of the Constitution establishes that the State owns the subsoil and non-removable natural resources. Therefore, although ethnic communities have rights over their lands, they are not the absolute owners of the subsoil where minerals are located. Moreover, since the mining and energy sectors are strategic for the Colombian economy, collective property rights clash with State efforts to exploit strategic minerals, which includes attracting foreign investors and protecting their private property once the exploitation licenses are granted (Velasco, 2011, p.411). The Colombian State has identified 519 Strategic Mining areas of which 17 are in Chocó, lying in areas that overlap collective territories and where licenses have been granted without the prior, free and informed consent of Afro-Colombian communities (OECD, 2017, p.9). Therefore, as has happened in other mining departments where Afro-Colombian communities

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32 By using the concept of ethnic communities in this research thesis, the associative component of mining villages is highlighted, and the local expressions used are respected.

33 One of those mining area (6,535 hectares) was allocated to the indigenous Embera, located in the Alto Andágueda region (OECD, 2017, p.9).
are established, such as Cauca, “tensions and disputes have emerged among government institutions in relation to favouring the rights of mining titleholders versus the rights of local communities” (Vélez-Torres, 2014, p.68).

In 2011, the Ministry of Mines and Energy calculated that in Chocó 5,981 people\textsuperscript{34} worked in gold, platinum and copper mines which mostly have no mining title (90.5%). Of those miners, 95.3% are from ethnic communities (Ministerio de Minas y Energía de Colombia, 2012, p.26). However, there is no reliable data regarding traditional or ASGM mining, especially in conflict-affected areas. As discussed in Section 3.2, ASGM miners have migrated to other types of mining due to the destruction of rivers and traditional mining sites, or they have mutated their practices in close interaction with NSAGs. In most mining areas of Chocó, it is no longer possible to find gold in riverbanks or superficial gravels due to the dramatic environmental destruction caused by the uncontrolled proliferation of semi- and fully mechanised unlicensed mining (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.35). Consequently, artisanal methods of gold mining such as panning (bareque) can no longer provide subsistence livelihoods to traditional miners and are not able to compete with industrialised forms of gold extraction (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2016, p.57).

Unlike hand-tools, big machinery is capable of reaching the ore deposits located in deeper subsoil layers. Thus, as illustrated in the study conducted by Tudd (2015, p. 726) in the northwest Chocó, some locals have allowed outsiders, from Brazil and other regions of Colombia, to bring backhoes and dragas (dredgers)\textsuperscript{35} into their territories [See Photograph 2]. According to Victor, one of the local leaders from Rio Quito, when dredgers arrived in that municipality, people

\textsuperscript{34} 5,138 men and 843 women.

\textsuperscript{35} Dragas (Dredgers) or Dragones or Dragas (Dragon dredgers or dragons) are the local names used to refer to giant mining machines used in water sources in Chocó to extract gold from sand, dirt, and gravel.
were captivated by the erroneous idea of finding larger amounts of gold\textsuperscript{36} and receiving money as compensation for letting these machines extract gold in their rivers.\textsuperscript{37} Consequently, as Tudd explains (2015, p.728) “the small-scale miners reversed the labour-based profit-sharing agreement”, according to which families of artisanal miners used to work together, and the profits were equally distributed among those who laboured as a group. Conversely, mining entrepreneurs offered a percentage of their profits to all the owners of a particular plot regardless of whether they were living on the territory or not, or alternatively they offered the percentage directly to the community councils. In many cases, artisanal miners started to receive profits for letting in the machinery without any additional effort.\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Photograph 2.} A Gold mining ‘dragon’ dredge working at Rio Quito (The author, 2016).

\textsuperscript{36} The daily productivity of mining sites using dredgers ranges between 15gm and 25gm of gold, whereas those using backhoes range between 80gm and 120gm of gold (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.28).

\textsuperscript{37} Informal conversation, Victor, Rio Quito, 1 May 2017.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
Artisanal miners have progressively become very dependent on dredgers especially when traditional places where they used to mine have been destroyed, and the environmental crisis of Chocó has exacerbated this further. This study found that ASGM miners have started to rely on the goodwill of mining entrepreneurs who sometimes allow them to use *bateas*\(^{39}\) and other rustic tools near the machines or to re-wash some of the rugs used in dredging to find left-over gold. As discussed in detail in Chapter Six, these agreements are fragile and the disorganised approach made on a ‘first come, first served’ policy has made the extraction of gold through artisanal methods inefficient.

Furthermore, agriculture, as an alternative livelihood activity has become harder as the rivers sedimented and most of the land has been eroded by the use of water contaminated with mercury and cyanide [See Photograph 3].\(^{40}\) According to the director of the environmental authority of Chocó (CODECHOCO),\(^{41}\) the operation of 500 unlicensed mining sites\(^{42}\) has degraded around 70,000 hectares including rainforest.\(^{43}\) Moreover, Colombia is the third largest mercury importer of the world, emitting between 50 and 100 tonnes of mercury yearly into the atmosphere (Telmer and Veiga, 2009, p.145). Given the effects of violence and unlicensed mechanised mining on the local communities of Chocó, in 2014 the Ombudsman’s office publicly announced a socio-environmental emergency (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.12).

\(^{39}\) *Batea* is the local name given to wooden discs made by hand (about 60 cm in diameter) used in artisanal gold mining to collect gravel from rivers where gold is mixed with sand and sediments, and gravel. Using circular movements, artisanal miners progressively separate gold from lighter sediments.

\(^{40}\) Interview, member of the community council in Rio Quito, 03 May 2017.

\(^{41}\) Corporación Autónoma Regional para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Chocó

\(^{42}\) Moya (2016, p.287) estimates that the number of unlicensed mechanised mining sites could be as high as 800.

\(^{43}\) Interview, director CODECHOCÓ, Quibdó, 16 November 2016.

The interaction between ASGM miners and owners of machinery in conflict-affected areas has bridged artisanal practices through various forms of informality, illegality and criminality (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2012, p.93). Therefore, formalising the mining sites as well as the agreements and alliances between ethnic communities and external entrepreneurs is now urgent. Likewise, it is vital to regulate the mining rules established by community councils and local associations, along with access to pensions and health services and the informed consent of communities, as well as their governance (Echavarria, 2014, p.58). However, as Massé (2016, p.261) points out, the main problem within the mining sector in Colombia is not only the existence of unlicensed mining sites but the pervasive illegality. Therefore, formalising and legalising artisanal miners is not enough to resolve issues of violence, inefficiency and environmental degradation if the current criminal dynamics of the mining sector are not resolved.
The complexity of resource-fuelled conflicts in Chocó where extractive economies and armed conflict are currently entangled makes this case study pertinent for the examination of the experience of working children and young people in hazardous forms of work. Due to the cultural and ancestral attachment of Afro-Colombian communities to mining, the percentage of children working in gold mining is higher than in other regions of Colombia, such as Nariño or Caldas (ILO, 2001, p.20). However, because of the mechanisation of mining and the involvement of NSAGs in unlicensed gold mining, the traditional roles performed by children and youths have changed. In 2014, the Ombudsman’s office reported the abduction of children and adolescents from urban areas of Medellin. These young people were later transferred to mining areas of Antioquia where they were used as miners, hitmen and in the general running of mining operations and many were sexually exploited (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2014a, p.29). Similarly, the OECD (2007) highlighted how children had been used by NSAGs and criminal organisations in tasks, directly and indirectly, related to the exploitation of gold in Chocó and, in the process, blurring the line “between family employment and the worst forms of child labour” (p.13).

Although the existence of an internal armed conflict is identified as one of the factors that trigger child labour alongside poverty, inequality and cultural beliefs around childhood also contribute significantly (Comité Interinstitucional Nacional de Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil y Protección del Jóven Trabajador, 2008, p.21). Moreover, national authorities have not recognised the combination of various forms of child labour in the midst of the Colombian conflict. The shift from the traditional roles performed by children as artisanal miners, towards working functions in the service of NSAGs and criminal networks thus justifies a more in-depth exploration within the remit of this thesis. To facilitate this, the study is situated in the complex reality of mining-and-conflict-affected areas of
Chocó, seeking to understand how combined forms of hazardous work shape the possibilities of action and survival of working children during armed conflict. Thus, given that both the control exerted by NSAGs in mining districts and the profit strategies vary, as discussed in this section, the analysis aims to illuminate the heterogeneity in the interactions between children and youths with NSAGs present in mining sites in Chocó.

3.4 Conclusions

This chapter contextualises the study by providing a historical overview of the internal armed conflict in Colombia and explaining how, within this long-lasting strife, the disputes around natural resources emerged. It illustrates how, although the central causes of this conflict are rooted in socio-political issues, natural resources became crucial to financing the operation of armed actors in the last decade. The boom of the international gold price during the first decade of the 2000s was the catalyst for the involvement of armed actors in the sector and the mechanisation of artisanal mining practices. Moreover, a pervasive culture of illegality and the institutional weakness of governmental authorities have facilitated NSAGs’ economic and political profit from the pillage of subsoil and non-removable natural resources.

It is possible to conclude from this historical overview that the complexity of resource-fuelled conflicts extends beyond the simplistic division between legal and illegal mining. The classification of mining activities between those that comply and those that do not comply with legal regulations ignores the nuances that exist within the spectrum of illegality, especially in conflict-affected areas. The NSAGs are financed by “criminal resource portfolios” (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo 2016, p.83) which combine a range of legal and illegal activities where gold is included. Therefore, the participation of NSAGs
and criminal networks in gold extraction has reproduced grey and criminal forms of mining where human rights abuses and widespread informality thrive (Foro Nacional por Colombia, 2016, p.240). Consequently, understanding these nuances is central to better explain, and situate in this research, the experiences of working children and youths.

In contextualising this study, this chapter aimed to highlight the intricate landscapes where working children operate. The intersection of gold mining and armed conflict makes Chocó a pertinent case study to explore the experience of working children during wartime. This chapter has revealed that the participation of children in working functions around ASGM mining is an ancestral practice, given the cultural attachment to gold mining of Afro-Colombian communities and indigenous peoples living in Chocó. Nonetheless, the mechanisation of mining and the arrival of NSAGs altered the working functions of children and adults and undermined their traditional profit-sharing systems, while ravaging the rainforest and contaminating water supplies. In sum, the experiences of children and young people analysed in this study are framed in a context where various forms of illicit actors, violence and gold mining are combined.

The transformations in the working functions and lived realities of children and youths thus call for further examination within the research of this study. This context chapter allows for the framing of the research findings presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven and it also aligns with the following chapter which examines the methodological approaches implemented given the volatile conditions of mining-and-conflict-affected areas.
Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the methodological approach and techniques used to conduct the research, and how the gathered data was then organised, analysed and written up in Chapters Five to Seven. I justify the selection of research methods according to the objective of this study, as outlined in Chapter One, and the challenging conditions of mining-and-conflict-affected settings.

The chapter is divided into six sections. I begin by providing an overview of the theoretical grounding and the epistemological paradigm that guides this study. The second section explains the research process and the reasons behind the selection of Chocó as a case study site. Moreover, it details how I accessed mining-and-conflict-affected areas and the participants in the research. The following section discusses the research methods applied, as well as the different levels of access obtained. The fourth section discusses the ethical implications of this study and the strategies used to mitigate the ethical dilemmas that arose as the research evolved. Following the examination of the praxis of ethics, I discuss reflexivity and how my interconnected positionalities influenced the collection of the information and the interpretation of the situation of children and young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. The last section explains how the empirical data was organised and analysed before I sum up the issues covered in the rest of the chapter.
4.1 Research framework

As described in Chapter One, the primary objective of this PhD research is to understand the lived experiences of working children and their possibilities of action and survival in conflict areas where hazardous forms of labour are combined. More specifically, I am interested in exploring how the intersection of gold mining and armed conflict frame children’s and young people’s lives and experiences, how they adapt and survive in those environments, and how intervention agencies perceive and assist them. Since this research gives primacy to perceptions and constructions of meaning, I considered interpretive and constructivist perspectives would comprise the most appropriate epistemological approach to underpin this study (Creswell, 2009, p.8).

Constructivist approaches to research “elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors” (Schwandt, 1998, p.222). Such a paradigm of inquiry is especially pertinent to the examination of how children and young people perceive and make sense of their surrounding contexts, and the relationships woven within it. Likewise, it enables examination of how the officials’ meaning-constructions condition their actions and inaction towards disadvantaged children in conflict-affected areas. Taking the conceptualisation of childhood as socially constructed within a network of relationships as a starting point (Eyber and Ager, 2004; Christensen and Prout, 2005; Clark-Kazak, 2009; Wells, 2009), in this study, children and young people are not approached as isolated subjects. Constructivism also incorporates the need to understand the way meanings are produced within broader structures and systems of representation (Schwandt, 1998, p.240). Therefore, I situate children’s experiences and narratives in a broader socio-cultural structure and historical context in which they are immersed with other social groups such as
community and family members, NSAGs, mining entrepreneurs and civil servants.

As Guba and Lincoln (1994, p.111) argue, because research findings are created through the interaction between the researcher and the researched, constructivist paradigms are transactional and subjectivist. Therefore, participatory methodologies are suitable to elicit informed knowledge that is socially and culturally situated. This study is not engaged in determining, through figures and statistics, children’s participation in hazardous forms of labour as a single objective and measurable reality. Rather, it aims to uncover the multiplicity of experiences that emerge and to reinforce constructivist critiques of attempts to embody all children into the same statistical and analytical boxes. It reflects a multiplicity of voices, including mine as a researcher as discussed in Section 4.5, and elucidates how multiple juxtaposed interpretations around child labour during armed conflict can coexist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.113). Moreover, this is a content-driven study rather than a theory-test one. Although it uses empirical data to test conceptual underpinnings of childhood, child labour and humanitarian assistance, the research questions are answered inductively, based on the collected data and the variables that arose during the analysis (Creswell, 2009, p.9).

Following Langsted (1994), this research considers children as active agents and experts on their own lives with a relevant voice. As Hart and Tyrer (2006) argue, the participatory inclusion of children in research in conflict-affected areas is valuable due to the emergency context, the knowledge that they have of their environment and their interpretation of their lives. Therefore, in order to have a more accurate picture of children’s realities and how they, as “experiencing subjects” (Greene and Hill, 2005, p.3), shape the world of natural resource conflicts, the scope of this study gives particular importance to
children’s and young people’s accounts of their lives and everyday practices in mining-and-conflict-affected communities. In this process, children performed the role of “instructors” of their lives while I became an active learner (Emond, 2005, p.124) trying to connect their world with the adult world.

Although aware of the near monopoly of ethnography as the research method of anthropologists (Widlok, 2010, p.42), I situate this interdisciplinary study within the umbrella of ethnography. The reason for this being that the actors and their perceptions are at the centre of ethnographic approaches which aim to “convey reality from a subject’s point of view” (Brockington and Sullivan, 2003, p.65), including recognising the researcher as producer of the ethnographic text. As Tedlock (2000) points out, ethnography is both a process and a product that involves the combination of “various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives” (p.455). By immersing myself in Chocó during a relatively prolonged period (October 2016 to June 2017), and applying participatory methods, I gained in-depth insights into the experiences of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas “from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p.221). Moreover, this research not only centres on children and adults from mining communities, but also includes those whose actions and perceptions largely determine the realities of young people, such as officials from intervention agencies, NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs.

The study combines an ethnography process with various research techniques of data collection which are framed by two methodological perspectives. The ‘composite approach’ proposed by Barakat et al. (2002) to collect data in war torn contexts, and the ‘mosaic approach’ suggested by Clark and Moss (2001) to conduct research involving children. The composite approach advocates the use
of a mixture of research methods (e.g., interviews, focus group, surveys, observation, among others) to cross-reference the information and thus mitigate the challenges and limitations that can appear in researching in conflict-affected areas. Some of these challenges are related to bias, ethical concerns and difficulties in accessing research areas, responders, and sampling, which make it “impossible to apply rigorous methodological norms expected of social science” in those contexts (Barakat et al., 2002, p.991). Therefore, the composite approach suggests combining complementary, creative and flexible methods that can be adapted to the nature of the conflict, the scope of analysis, the participants, and to the various levels of access granted. Even though the composite approach gives significant attention to participant selection and participant-friendly methods, it does not detail specific methodological considerations when conducting research with children in conflict-affected settings.

On the other hand, the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) is a methodological framework initially designed for scholars and practitioners interested in listening to under-five-year-olds and their everyday experiences in early childhood centres. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm of inquiry, the mosaic approach “acknowledges the need to seek to understand how children ‘see’ the world in order to understand their actions” (Clark, 2005, p.29). In this quest, observation is used alongside multiple participatory methods (e.g., map making, interviews, cameras, tours) which place children’s strengths at the foreground to provide ways in which they can convey their multiple (mosaic) perspectives and emotions (Clark, 2004, p.144). Despite its origins in early childhood contexts, this multi-method model is a participant-centred rather than a child-only approach (Clark, 2011, p.322). Therefore, creative methods, as discussed in Section 4.3.3 below, also proved to be effective with older children, muchachos/muchachas (lads/lasses) and non-literate adult participants.
Even though conflict-affected zones were not in the initial scope of the mosaic perspective, the participatory approach of knowledge generation (rather than knowledge extraction) (Clark, 2011, p.323), as well as the consideration of children as competent active actors and meaning makers, makes this approach especially relevant to my study. In sum, for the project of researching in mining-and-conflict-affected settings, the composite and the mosaic approaches are clearly aligned and complementary. Together, these methodological proposals decipher multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations that coexist when analysing the lives of young people during natural resource conflicts.

4.2 The research process

Inspired by my experience working and living in Colombia, as explained in Chapter One, this study was developed in four stages. The first stage involved an in-depth literature review of children and armed conflict, child labour and the humanitarianism of childhood. As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, the examination of these themes allowed me to identify three main theoretical gaps around the study of working children amid natural resource conflicts. Firstly, the tendency to conceive work and war as inherently opposed to childhood. Secondly, the simplistic approach given to understanding the position of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas which separates children according to the perceived main role performed, namely armed or unarmed. Thirdly, the existing hierarchies of value of disadvantaged children in the humanitarian practice that render child combatants as more in need of protection than other equally vulnerable groups of children. This revision of the literature enabled me to refine my initial research questions and to develop an
analytical framework for critical analysis which combines concepts from the sociology of childhood, the anthropology of conflict, and humanitarian studies.

The second stage comprised a lengthy process of ethics assessment and the definition of methods given the research questions and the approach of the research. As I explain in detail in Section 4.4, the ethical approval of this study by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) of the University of Manchester was necessary given the participation of under-sixteens and the volatile settings where I collected empirical data. The third stage consisted of conducting field research in Colombia over eight months where primary data was collected from mining-and-conflict-areas of Chocó, as well as from Bogotá where most intervention agencies and governmental institutions are based. Finally, the research process comprised a stage where the empirical data was organised and analysed before the writing up process.

In this section, I explain the reasons behind the selection of a single case study, why I chose Chocó, the pre-field and on-the-field strategies that allowed me to access mining-and-conflict-affected settings and the participants in these areas. I outline some of the challenges faced during the collection of data, the actions taken to overcome them, and some lessons learned – from which, hopefully, other researchers could also learn.

4.2.1 Why and how did I choose Chocó as a case study?

As examined in Chapter Three, the data collection of this study mostly took place in mining-and-conflict-affected areas of the department of Chocó located on Colombia’s western Pacific coast. Since this research also aims to understand the rationale behind policymakers regarding child protection, an important part of the field research was also conducted during various trips to Bogota. As I
mentioned above, most of the Colombian governmental institutions working at the national level and international organisations have their offices in the capital city. However, the initial research plan included two regions as case studies, namely Chocó and Cauca (See Map 3). Both are two of the leading territories where the extraction of minerals and armed actors have historically come together. Therefore, they offered the possibility to study and compare the relationship between different types of child labour, as well as the work of humanitarian and governmental organisations to protect child workers in those settings.

Map 3. Preliminary research areas.

Source: (Dictalia, 2019)
Before the field research started, I contacted the Swiss organisation *Terres des Homme* and the NGO *Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó* (FISCH). At that time, *Terres des Homme* was funding a four-year project to reduce school dropout and to foster children’s leadership skills in local schools of mining-and-conflict-affected areas in Cauca. On the other hand, FISCH was working throughout the whole department of Chocó with victims of the internal armed conflict, children and adolescents, leaders and community members, including those involved in ASGM. Both organisations granted institutional support to my research and offered me the possibility to work as an unpaid intern.

When I arrived in Colombia in October 2016, I made a one-week pilot visit to Cauca where I had the opportunity to visit one school in a mining district and support an assessment workshop carried out with children by *Terres des Hommes* and its local partner *Tierra de Paz*. Since the project was planned to be implemented in schools and my pilot visit took place almost at the end of the academic year, the formal commencement of the project was scheduled for February 2017. Therefore, I initially agreed with *Tierra de Paz* to start the research activities in March 2017 and gather the data in Chocó between November 2016 and February 2017. However, I realised once I arrived in Chocó that time and economic constraints would not allow me to carry out a comparative study as initially planned.

As I explain in detail in Section 4.2.3, it took me more time than initially expected to embed myself and gain a close interaction with local communities in Chocó. The process of trust building with the local NGOs and local leaders was not easy nor straightforward, thereby access to local communities was granted only after a couple of months working in Chocó. Similarly, this study did not include youngsters from indigenous communities, also present in

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mining areas, due to access restrictions and language barriers\textsuperscript{45}. Furthermore, most of the institutional and local activities ceased between mid-December 2016 and mid-January 2017 due to Christmas celebrations, which reduced the window of time for the study. Likewise, I faced economic limitations. Since gold and silver mining are the main economic activities in Chocó, the cost of living is higher compared to other parts of the country including Bogota. Most agricultural commodities are imported, and the primary means of transport is fluvial. Therefore, trips to most mining areas can only be made by boat, which is very expensive especially when community boats are not available. All these factors diminished the possibilities to conduct a comparative study in Cauca.

After discussing these limitations with my supervisors, I decided to conduct one in-depth case study. Thankfully, Terres des Homme and Tierra de Paz were supportive of this decision.

Opting for a one-case study allowed me the time needed to gather in-depth information, situate Chocó within a broader context, and deconstruct existing theories regarding childhood, child labour, and humanitarianism. Moreover, it enabled me to “develop richer, more comprehensive explanations that can capture the complexity of social life” (Neuman, 2014, p.42) in multi-factorial situations such as child labour in mining-and-conflict-affected settings. As Yin (1994, p.1) argues, single case studies are suitable when aiming to answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a “contemporary phenomenon within some real-life contexts”. By describing how my original research approach changed, I am seeking to illustrate how flexible the research plan needs to be when applied in conflict-affecting settings. Likewise, I am aiming to show that conducting a multiple-case study was difficult and demanding given the time and economic constraints I had as a student researcher (Yin, 1994, p.45). Therefore, the selection of Chocó as a single case study is due to its relevance and the access

\textsuperscript{45} These communities predominantly speak Embera and Waunana.
gained, as well as economic and time constraints. Although Chocó is a representative case study and it sheds light on conceptual approximations to the experiences of children during natural resource conflicts, this research does not aim to claim generalisability. As I discuss in Chapter Eight, further comparative research is needed since it could help to identify and contrast patterns of action and trends in humanitarian response, as well as produce “cross-contextual generalities” (Mason, 2002, p.197) regarding childhood experiences.

While in Chocó, I focused on three mining-and-conflict-affected areas which I chose based on three factors. Firstly, the presence of local leaders and community councils linked to FISCH, who could facilitate access and institutional support. Secondly, the active extraction of gold controlled or extorted by NSAGs. Finally, favourable security conditions to conduct the research. These areas, which are shown in Map 4 below, are as follows:

a) **Bebarama**: This small area is located in the municipality of Medio Atrato. Historically, FARC-EP’s 34th Front controlled this area and, after their demobilisation process, several criminal organisations have tried to gain control over this territory and its financial revenues.

b) **Río Quito**: This municipality is located next to Quibdó, the capital city of Chocó. Communities from this district have been affected by a high rate of mercury poisoning and the presence of paramilitary forces and criminal organisations. Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter Three, in this area, foreigners control unlicensed-mechanised mining sites which are mined and controlled by NSAGs.
c) **Unión Panamericana:** This municipality is located in the San Juan sub-region in the south of Chocó. It is well known for its vast gold reserves, as well as for the control exercised by paramilitary forces, guerrilla groups and criminal organisations.

**Map 4.** Focalised mining-and-conflict-affected areas in Chocó.
4.2.2 How did I gain access to mining-and-conflict-affected areas?

Access was probably the most challenging aspect of this research. It was not easy or straightforward. Like other research studies conducted in conflict-affected zones, access to mining-and-conflict-affected areas, as well as to the participants, was a mixture of “luck and strategy” (Radsch, 2009, p.102). As mentioned above, FISCH was the local NGO which granted me institutional and even personal support throughout the fieldwork. They allocated me a desk at their tiny premises, linked me with other contacts, and invited me to their events and trips to mining and non-mining villages. Their friendly staff also shared innumerable coffees with me and even picked me up at the airport and helped me to find accommodation when I first arrived in Quibdó. This successful interaction with FISCH was only possible thanks to additional contacts and multiple negotiations carried out before the actual research in Chocó began.

In 2014, when I was writing my PhD proposal, I contacted an NGO called Tierra Digna asking for guidance on mineral mining. Coincidentally, Tierra Digna had worked on several projects with FISCH, and it was them who put me in contact with the latter organisation. I was lucky, but I also had to strategically plan and negotiate the terms under which my research would be conducted. Without the referral from Tierra Digna, I probably would not have been able to conduct my research in Chocó. There was a general reluctance to admit interns since some researchers had taken advantage of local organisations to extract information without returning or helping NGOs in any manner. To overcome this initial barrier, I offered FISCH my support in their activities, and we negotiated the

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This Colombian organisation is based in Bogotá and has worked in the defence and protection of communities affected by extractive industries and economic projects implemented by governmental authorities and private companies.
production of an ABC book about mining, as well as allowing them access to the research methodologies and findings.

My institutional affiliation to FISCH was essential as this accredited local organisation, created in 2006, involves 63 community councils. These councils grant approval to projects implemented by intervention agencies, make decisions over the territory, and even make decisions regarding the presence of external researchers like me. Luckily enough, at the time this research was conducted, the director of FISCH was one of the commissioners and representatives of Afro-Colombian communities who were active in the peace talks between FARC-EP and the Colombian government. His participation and the outcome of the peace agreement, in which Afro-Colombian communities were explicitly included, made FISCH a highly valued and non-stigmatised organisation.

Deciding the specific areas in which to conduct the research was challenging and demanding. Although FISCH linked me to several community councils in mining areas, not all of them answered my calls, were geographically reachable or accepted my research proposal. During the first couple of months, I made various trips to mining areas, explained my research in different ways and created my network of contacts through ‘snowballing’ by asking interested people to refer me to others (Mason, 2002, p.142). Unlike other researchers and even officials implementing programmes in Chocó, who usually travel from Bogota or Medellin for a couple of days, I was living in Chocó. By living there, I tried to immerse myself in local practices and reduce the idea of mining communities as the objects rather than the subjects of this research. This was particularly rare but highly appreciated by locals. My presence in Quibdó enabled me to be present during meetings organised by intervention agencies or governmental institutions, which gradually connected me to an informal
network of leaders from mining villages travelling to Quibdó to attend these events. I progressively created connections and rapport that finally granted me access to mining communities. As Martin-Ortega and Herman (2009, p.233) highlight, “accessing certain groups often depends upon support from the right, influential, person”.

Moreover, besides contacts and rapport, meticulous preparation of research questions and the language used to present this research and ask questions was central to gaining access to mining-and-conflict-affected areas. In general, people were scared to talk about mining since it is a sensitive and highly stigmatised topic. Therefore, access was granted under the premise that my thesis only intended to understand the context and experiences rather than report non-legalised mining to national authorities. Although the focus of this study revolves around economic activities considered illegal in Colombian legislation, the particular emphasis of my questions was on the representation of children in their communities and their perception regarding the extraction of minerals. I always adopted a non-judgmental approach to participants by never referring to local economic activities as illegal or criminal. As discussed in Chapter Three, the broad conception of illegality is controversial, especially so in conflict-affected settings like Chocó where extractive economies are part of the cultural heritage of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. Therefore, it is a normalised situation where locals generally do not refer to mining as criminal or illegal even in the cases where NSAGs or illicit actors are involved.

Luck was also on my side when I chose the areas of research. After my departure from Chocó, some of the mining-and-conflict affected areas I visited were no longer safe. Armed confrontations and territorial disputes increased among NSAGs, especially in areas formally controlled by FARC-EP. On the
other hand, this shift also illustrates how I documented a specific snapshot in
time of a very volatile situation. When I retrospectively consider the fieldwork
material, I feel that my initial expectations were exceeded. I always had the
feeling of being in the right place, at the right moment, with the right people.
Despite initial obstacles regarding being accepted in an unfamiliar context,
people were extremely helpful and appreciative of the way the research was
conducted. In sum, getting access entailed a mixture of persistence, luck and
planning. In the following subsection, I explain the process of accessing and
choosing participants.

4.2.3  How did I gain access to participants?

Taking into account the research questions and approach of this study, I used
specific strategies to contact and include each of the following four groups of
participants:

a)  Adult members of mining communities.

b)  Children and muchachos(as) living in mining-and-conflict-affected
districts.

c)  Mining managers and owners of semi- and fully mechanised unlicensed
mining sites, locally known as ‘empresarios mineros’ [mining
entrepreneurs], and ex-members of NSAGs in charge or involved in the
extraction of gold or the extortion of mining revenues.

d)  Policymakers and officials from intervention agencies and governmental
institutions in charge of child protection programmes in mining-and-
conflict-affected areas. This group also includes army and police officers in
charge of tackling unlicensed mining.
Once access was granted by local leaders and community councils, I started to visit the focal areas. I spent between one to two weeks in each area depending on the availability of transportation, security conditions, and the local communities’ own agenda. Once at a mining village, I explained to locals the objective of my study and the importance of talking to young people. My initial attempts to explain the research were not always successful, indeed, even explaining what a PhD is was confusing for some. Moreover, I did not have money or incentives of any kind to give to participants, and many feared being stigmatised or reported to the police. Again, my affiliation to FISCH and the reassurance that my intention was not to report or judge the way they work in mining sites helped me to access these participants.

In this process, I had to get familiar with mining jargon and local power structures. It took me time and practice to explain the research, which was, itself, changing as the fieldwork progressed. I always endeavoured to humbly approach people with profound respect, despite asymmetrical power relations and my ethnic background; therefore, as I expand in Section 4.5. I introduced myself as a student but also as a learner from people’s experiences. I had to be patient and prudent since it took time to know the leaders, the villages, the politics of miners, and the tensions between local community councils, miner entrepreneurs, and NSAGs. Nonetheless, my interest in young people and children was recognised as very valuable for mining communities. Some leaders and community members even referred to me as ‘teacher’ which somehow helped me to gain respect and validation from the communities, as well as to promote interest in my research.
Unión Panamericana was the only area I accessed by bus rather than boat. Therefore, validation and approval from communities in Rio Quito and Bebarama were gained slowly during my journeys to mining areas. Since hiring a private boat was not economically possible for me, I had to rely on local community boats. In Bebarama, each community council owns one boat which is used to transport food and supplies to these remote areas. When there is space and a good relationship with boat drivers, one can travel in these boats which are neither scheduled nor on time. Even though I built a good relationship with local leaders, I was not given any priority to travel to mining areas. I had to negotiate with boat drivers and on various occasions wait for hours until I realised that there was no space or opportunity to travel. Depending on the boat engine and the flow of the river, travelling from Quibdó to Bebarama could last between six to seven hours. As illustrated in Photograph 4, community boats are usually overcrowded, and people travel on top of beer boxes or food sacks. Although challenging, these long journeys helped me to be accepted by locals as it was unusual for an outsider to travel side by side with them. Moreover, I had more opportunities to have informal conversations, share, and meet people before I arrived in local communities.
The fact that Afro-Colombian communities are organised had an impact on my research.” Thanks to the community councils, I had access to the communities and these helped me to identify the participants and provided local facilities to the research activities, as well as support, accommodation and food. In some cases, I achieved an excellent rapport with local leaders, and even one of them introduced me as ‘his daughter’, as an informal way of expressing closeness and encouraging people to take care of me. However, not every community was equally welcoming. Despite my good relationship with local leaders and some members of the community councils in Rio Quito, I had to spend less time in this area. Miners and other community members were less willing to talk due to fear and stigmatisation. Moreover, it was the less secure area for me to get to and to stay in due to the presence of NSAGs and criminal organisations. As Celestina (2018, p.374) suggests, despite the assumed linear relationship between time and trust during field research, trust is situational and temporary. Time does not always guarantee trust or rapport from participants, especially
so in conflict-affected areas. These differentiated levels of access and trust greatly informed the findings of this research and illustrate how diverse the experience of mining communities and children are.

**Children and muchachos(as)**

All children and young people who participated in this research were engaged in close interaction with community councils and schoolteachers. Initially, my research intended only to include adolescents between 14 to 17 years of age. However, community members and teachers asked me to include children from the age of eight, some of whom were also involved in gold mining and diverse subset activities. My presence in mining areas where government intervention is rarely present was regarded as a priceless opportunity for children to play and have leisure activities. I quickly realised that chronological age was not a social marker to classify children. Therefore, it was not the only selection criteria of participants. As I explain in Section 4.3, I divided the research activities between adults and children. However, some adolescents took part in the adults’ activities. By providing this flexibility, I identified social connotations of childhood and local dynamics around young people.

Although mining communities are familiar with the category ‘adolescence’, it is not used in everyday language. Therefore, I was always asked for clarification when I referred to participants as such. After puberty, children are identified as ‘jóvenes’ (youths) or muchachos(as). According to local accounts, adolescence is only a category used by intervention agencies and civil servants. The terms muchachos and muchachas are not conditioned by chronological age and refer to a flexible process of transition from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, to reflect local accounts as accurately as possible, I use the categories of ‘muchachos(as)’ and ‘young people’ interchangeably throughout this thesis to
refer to adolescents as well as to those youths that are not yet locally regarded as adults.

**Mining entrepreneurs and NSAGs**

The initial research plan did not specifically envisage the inclusion of mining entrepreneurs as research participants. The contact that I established with them took place thanks to my interaction with ASGM communities. By attending their assemblies and meetings and having informal conversations, I was quickly introduced to some mining entrepreneurs, several of whom even let me visit their mine sites. I seized the opportunity of including them as participants once in the field and I made sure to explain my role as an academic and to secure their consent to take pictures and use the information they shared with me. My interaction with these participants took place sporadically and mostly through informal conversations.

On the other hand, the participation of ex-members of NSAGs, which was included in the research strategy, took place during the last three months of fieldwork. Thanks to my previous professional experience in conflict-affected areas, I was aware of the challenges and the potential impossibility of incorporating this group into the fieldwork. However, the network of contacts I built, the time I spent in mining communities, and the close relationships that I forged with some leaders enabled me to approach former members of NSAGs. Although I did not include any member of criminal organisations or self-identified as such, I contacted three ex-members of paramilitary groups operating in mining areas through the Colombian Reintegration Agency.
(ACR), and former FARC-EP members through the UN Verification Mission established for the reintegration of this guerrilla group into civil society.

Policymakers, officials, army and police officers

Officials from intervention agencies and governmental institutions at the national, regional and local level were contacted through three strategies: previous work contacts, snowballing, and formal written requests. Before I arrived in Colombia, I created a stakeholders’ matrix in Excel which was updated as the fieldwork unfolded. This matrix helped to keep a record of the people I contacted as well as identify those which denied me access. As I discuss in Section 4.5, my working experience with issues related to children and human rights helped me to contact officials in Bogota working at national level which, in turn, later facilitated my access to local offices in Chocó through snowballing sampling. Contacting officials was a long process, involving both success and deep frustration, in which the use of my interconnected positionalities and identifiers was central.

Although most NGOs and intervention agencies welcomed me as a researcher, allowing me to conduct interviews and have access to reports, I had to deal with long and erratic bureaucratic procedures and denials of access from some governmental organisations. In order to overcome this barrier, I sent fourteen written requests asking for information and appealing to my constitutional right of petition which allows me, as a Colombian, to access information from officials, army and police officers. Although twelve of these petitions were answered, most of them did not provide complete or updated data or referred

\footnote{The ACR is a special administrative presidential unit in charge of the demobilisation, disarmament and reincorporation of people and NSAGs into civil society. In 2017, in the frame of the peace accords and demobilisation process of FARC-EP, the president on duty, Juan Manuel Santos, altered the functions of this agency and changed its name to the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) (ARN, 2017).}
me to other already-contacted institutions, which led me into fruitless administrative loops. Having established how access was or was not gained, the following section describes the research methods used to collect data with the participants.

4.3 Research Methods

The methodological tools to conduct this study were selected taking into account their appropriateness to answer the objectives and research questions proposed, as well as the type of participant. Each group of participants brought their own range of views and knowledge regarding child workers and childhood to the research process. Adults brought their experience on the social construction of vulnerability and childhood. Children and muchachos(as) brought their inside knowledge of working and coping with the constrained conditions of mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Mining entrepreneurs and NSAGs brought knowledge about the functioning of unlicensed mining and the relationships with child workers and mining communities. Likewise, officials brought their perceptions and feelings developed through working and dealing with disadvantaged children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas.

The information gathered through everyday interaction and semi-participant observation was complemented by document analysis, semi-structured interviews, community conversations and creative methods using visuals and storytelling. As Randall, Anderson and Taylor (2015) argue, when analysing and comparing research practices with children experiencing abuse or maltreatment, “community involvement is important in designing and conducting research into the sensitive issue of child abuse” (p.6). Therefore, the design and application of the methodology were carefully discussed with FISCH, community councils and schoolteachers.
4.3.1 Document Analysis

The analysis of legal documents, reports produced by local NGOs and governmental institutions as well as academic papers was crucial for both the preparation of interviews and the expansion of my knowledge prior to the interaction with local communities. This literature review also allowed me to become familiar with the work and roles that NGOs and institutions perform locally and the multiple methods of mining used in the different areas included in the study, as well as dominant discourses and social representations of mining, childhood and armed conflict. As one of the goals of my research is to understand why privileged attention has been paid to some groups of children over others equally vulnerable, the analysis of policies and reports was essential. These documents provided some benchmarks for assessing the implementation of the policies in the field, and the diverse representations of the phenomena.

4.3.2 Semi-participant observation

As a characteristic component of ethnographic approaches to research, participant observation was a pillar of the process of data collection in this study. As various scholars have noted (Spradley, 1980, p.58; Schensul and LeCompte, 2013, p.85), there are different levels of observation and participation ranging from non-participation to full immersion. Given the dangerous and illicit nature of natural resource conflicts, I did not get fully involved in either gold mining or other roles at the service of NSAGs. I performed an observer-as-participant role which implied “conducting observations for brief periods […] the researcher is known and recognised, but relates to the ‘subjects’ of study solely as researcher” (Angrosino, 2007, p.54). Participant observation and detailed field notes are particularly useful when researching in volatile environments such as mining-and-conflict-affected areas.
In particular, participant observation can help to “fill the gap” created by contradictory or edited accounts given by participants who face fear and distrust since “what people say, and what they actually think, feel or do can be quite different” (Scott-Jones and Watt, 2010, p.110).

This semi-participant observation approach implied taking part in some everyday life routines of the communities visited, observing various techniques of gold extraction, and getting involved in football games, social events, meetings and conversations. Likewise, when, on two separate occasions, I visited one of the temporary camps established by the Colombian government for the demobilisation of former members of FARC-EP, I was able to observe the military hierarchy in place, the living conditions, members’ narratives around their previous control over mining activities, and their reasons for enlistment. Through my role as observer-as-participant, I was able, not without obstacles and limitations, to build different levels of trust and rapport, as well as gaining an understanding of how armed actors, communities and children “act, think and feel in the way they do” (Wacquant, 2003, p.5 as cited in Scott-Jones and Watt, 2010, p.109).

Additionally, semi-participant observation allowed me to adjust the participatory research techniques implemented. For instance, by participating in meetings and workshops organised by the community councils, I observed that local communities pray before any group activity and allocate a few minutes to tell jokes. Although I do not consider myself a religious person, I understood that these routines and rituals bring meaning to their activities and provide a better disposition to group interaction. Prayers and jokes served as icebreakers and made a difference when I incorporated them during my research activities. In addition, by observing daily activities, I had the opportunity to identify actions that locals usually took for granted and did not
necessarily mention during group conversations (Punch, 2004, p. 101), such as the chores performed by children, the interactions between ASGM miners and mining entrepreneurs, and the amount of time children spend with neighbours when their parents are away at mining sites.

Furthermore, as Scott-Jones and Watt (2010, p.107) assert, researchers have a great responsibility to document their accounts and observations while also reflexively situating them in the socio-political and cultural conditions under which they are produced. Although field diaries are inevitably selective and authored since they reflect the situations and things that researchers consider relevant while leaving aside other observed events considered less relevant (Emerson et al., 2001, p.353), they were very useful to record statements, observations, methodological and theoretical reflections as well as meta-data. Meta-data, such as silences, rumours, evasions, inventions and denials, are also useful indicators of power relations and people’s perceptions and meanings (Fujii, 2009).

4.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as another method due to them being “well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (Barribal and While, 1994, p.330). Moreover, as suggested by Carpenter (2005, p.301), through semi-structured interviews it is possible to explain “why some discourses and social representations are invoked, and others are avoided”. For the specific case of this study, they helped me to identify social representations of childhood, child labour, and victimhood.
Semi-structured interviews were conducted predominantly with officials from intervention agencies and governmental organisations, as well as army and police officers [see Appendix 1]. However, in cases where group conversations were not possible in mining villages or were perceived as dangerous by the respondent, I privileged this research method [see Appendix 2]. Likewise, for security reasons, feelings of fear and the need for confidentiality, eleven of the interviews were not recorded using a voice recorder. Although these participants agreed on letting me take notes, they directly requested that they remain anonymous, and asked me to refer to our meetings as informal conversations. All interviews were prepared in advance and carried out once for a maximum of sixty minutes. They were conducted based on a set of questions that guided the conversations, rather than directing them [see Appendix 3].

Although I engaged with most children through imaginative sessions (as discussed below in Section 4.3.5), I used individual semi-structured interviews with five under-eighteen-year-old participants due to recent armed confrontations between NSAGs in their villages and fear of threats [see Appendix 2]. While these children were responsive to the interview questions, their answers were visibly more limited in comparison to those who participated in imaginative sessions. As Westcott and Littleton (2005) point out, an important myth to dispel is that interviews with children are easy to conduct. Children are not always willing to answer to our questions, moreover, “it is easy to forget that children may rarely be spoken to, or seriously listened to, unless they have done something ‘wrong’” (p.141). Even though intrusive questions were not asked in these interviews, children’s accounts were visibly conditioned by their guardians’ presence and the individual approach I took when engaging with them. Interviewed children tried to negotiate their answers with adults, gain their approval through eye contact or body language,
or smile when they did not want to respond to a particular question. Although teachers and other adults were also present during imaginative sessions, these group discussions helped to reduce the pressure on individual responses and allowed the children to express themselves in a more relaxed environment. Preparation of the set of questions was vital, especially when it came to the interviews with former members of NSAGs. In all cases, they asked to read the questions before agreeing to be interviewed. Furthermore, it was crucial to present myself as independent and neutral as possible, reassuring them that I had no affiliation with military forces or law enforcement bodies. To approach sensitive questions (i.e., their participation in gold mining, extortion from mining communities, or child recruitment), I read several reports concerning these issues and formulated questions that invited the interviewees to corroborate the information of those reports. This strategy helped me to reduce stress and their apprehension about my research, as well as to approach other observed issues in the field. However, on various occasions, some of these participants decided to skip questions, remain silent or only provided short answers.

In total, I conducted 66 semi-structured interviews with four types of participant; eleven of these are labelled as informal conversations and eight were performed in groups, as presented in Table 1, below:
Table 1. Number of participants interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of participants</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policymakers and officials from intervention agencies, governmental institutions, police and army officers (7 group interviews – 33 individual interviews)</td>
<td>Informal conversations (11) 12 Interviews 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and family members</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children (between 10-17 years of age)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former members of NSAG [See Appendix 4]</td>
<td>FARC-EP 5* Paramilitaries (one group interview) 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One of these participants was 17 years old.

4.3.4 From focus groups to ‘Charlas’

Focus groups were another pillar of the initial research strategy to approach mining communities and to gain insights on their views and perceptions. Given their dialogic and interactive characteristics (Morgan, 1996, p. 130), focus groups allow listening to a plurality of voices concerning a specific issue or question. They facilitate deep discussions while reducing pressure on individual informants. Moreover, they enable the researcher to approach meanings and symbols and to “witness social interactions” when tensions and contradictions are also present (Madriz, 2000, p.841). According to Krueger (1988, p.27), focus groups should be small (between four and twelve people) so as to give each participant the opportunity to share their ideas and avoid fragmentation of the group. However, in my fieldwork, focus groups as such were not methodologically possible in mining areas.

This was due, in part, to my access to mining communities being granted through community councils, as explained in Section 4.2.3, which meant that I was not able to participate fully in the selection process of the community
members to take part in group discussions. Moreover, excluding some participants from the research activities would have hindered my presence in mining communities, as well as reinforcing local jealousies and tensions. Therefore, in some communities, dozens of adults and young people attended group activities [see Photograph 5], whereas in others only a few of them were interested in participating [see Photograph 6]. This disparity brought methodological challenges and implications for the information gathered since the collection process was not uniform across the different communities. When the groups were large, local leaders tried to dominate the conversation, some participants were very shy, and others were cautious of disclosing personal information in front of other group members. In these cases, I organised small groups in which participants usually discussed issues related to children or the implications of mining, and then shared their ideas in a plenary. Before these plenaries, I approached each of the small groups and asked questions so as to give each person the opportunity to participate. By doing this I had the chance to listen to most participants, but I also respected when they decided to remain silent.

Photograph 5. Charla in Bebarama (The author, February 2017)  
Another struggle was dealing with the way local communities manage their routines and time. There were constant cancellations and reprogramming of meetings and trips to rural areas. I quickly realised that my research agenda was not necessarily theirs. Meetings never started on time, and most of the group conversations were not conducted during daylight as most of the male adults and adolescents work in mining sites during the day. I learnt to be patient, to listen carefully and to be ready to conduct the research activities on a more ad hoc basis when people were available. This also implied listening to people’s demands and agendas. In some areas, male adults and muchachos requested me to conduct the group discussions only with men, whereas in other territories they agreed to have mixed gender conversations.

Locals increasingly labelled our group encounters as ‘charlas’ [talks]. The word ‘charla’ in Spanish refers to a conversation that takes place informally in a familiar, relaxed and enjoyable setting. This appellation allocates positive connotations to group discussions and denotes significant engagement of participants. However, charlas were not possible with most of the communities from Rio Quito due to the permanent presence of NSAGs in the territory. Group sessions would have been seen as suspicious, putting the participants at risk. As in similar research conducted with young people in conflict-affected areas of Colombia, group discussion did not always prove to be successful due to fear and absence of trust among participants (see Roshani, 2013, p.32). In those cases, semi-structured interviews with the support of local leaders were preferred. Given the methodological particularities of these interactional experiences, I refer to them throughout this thesis as charlas rather than focus groups.

As mentioned in Section 4.2.3, in conducting charlas, it was important to allocate time for prayers and ice-breaking activities. Given the low levels of
literacy of the Chocó population, the use of creative methods involving objects and games used with children also proved to be useful with adults. These strength-based methods potentiated their communications skills while making participants feel respected, comfortable and without fear of possible judgment. At the same time, these methods ensured better rapport and validity since participants provided more natural and truthful responses. On many occasions, the participants continued sharing their stories and narratives with me after the charlas or interviews had finished. In total, I conducted eleven charlas in which 75 men and 76 women from nine villages participated [see Appendix 5].

4.3.5 Imaginative methods

Drawing both on Clark’s (2004, p.144) mosaic framework for conducting research with children and on the ‘research toolkit’ proposed by Johnson, Hart and Colwell (2014) to engage young children in research, I used imaginative methods based on visuals and storytelling with child participants, alongside observation and some interviews. Using artistic methods to approach adolescents and children in conflict-affected contexts has been proven to help achieve engagement and participation (see Veale, 2005; In Place of War, 2015). These methods facilitate capturing verbal and non-verbal communication of children’s experiences and connect “different pieces of perspectives in order to create an image of children’s world, both individual and collective” (Clark, 2005, p.31). Moreover, they encourage children to be more explicit about knowledge they take for granted, such as their daily routines or their roles at mining sites (Clark, 2011, p.323).

Taking into account children’s skills and their closeness with extractive industries in the study areas, I used tours, eliciting objects, and visuals, intended to stimulate free expression. On three occasions when security conditions allowed and support from local teachers was available, I used group
child-led tours in which the children indicated significant objects and places.\textsuperscript{48} For instance, they showed me those areas they considered important and those rendered as dangerous. During all the sessions, I used a voice recorder, which the children decorated and named\textsuperscript{49}; and which facilitated the process of documenting accounts. Moreover, I observed the interaction between them as well as their conflicting views regarding safety and preferred activities [see Photograph 7].

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{photograph7.png}
\end{center}

\textbf{Photograph 7.} Group child-led tour in Bebarama (The author, March 2017)

In addition, to encourage discussion, I used dolls that were culturally sensitive to facilitate identification and representation (Johnson, Hart and Colwell, 2014, p.49) [see Photograph 8]. Dolls were used in two activities: ‘the visiting children’ and ‘tell the difference’. In the visiting children activity, participants imagine that the dolls represent children visiting or just moving to their mining villages. I ask them to explain to these visitors (dolls) the ‘rules’ of the villages, the safe and unsafe places and the experience in the mine sites. During the ‘tell

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{48} As well as these, ice-breaking games preceded all the research activities with children. \\
\textsuperscript{49} Some names given were Jeider, motty or Yarleidy.
\end{flushleft}
the difference’ activity, I aimed to gain insight on gendered experiences of children by asking participants to compare boys and girls in regard to their roles and experiences living in those villages. Although most children openly talked about their own experiences, in some cases the dolls facilitated their referring to an imaginary third person who faces particular problems and situations.

Similarly, I provided pictures of artisanal and mechanised mining sites, asking children to compare them and to differentiate between formative and dangerous roles they and adults perform [see Image 1]. These pictures were combined with ‘feelings cards’ which included four positive feelings (i.e., happy, brave, loved, and proud) and four negative feelings (i.e. sad, bored, scared, and angry) [see Image 2]. These visuals facilitated free expression regarding their perceptions about the contexts and their personal experiences [see Photographs 9 and 10].

Photograph 8. Dolls used to encourage discussion (The author, January 2017).

50 Happy [Feliz], brave [sin miedo], loved [amado], proud [orgulloso], Sad [triste], bored [aburrido], scared [con miedo] and angry [mal genio].
**Image 1.** Visuals of ASGM and mechanised mining sites used with children

*Source:* (El Espectador, 2012)

**Image 2.** Feeling cards

*Source:* (The author, 2016)

Although some techniques were more effective than others depending on the age of the participants (e.g., tours and the ‘feeling cards’ worked better with younger children whereas adolescents preferred visuals of mining and free conversations), the use of a collection of methods based on creativity and imagination helped me to engage children in the research process more naturally. Likewise, they provided me with a better understanding of children’s construction of meaning regarding labour, work, mining and armed conflict in their specific context.

As the fieldwork progressed, some techniques and questions were refined. My method of approaching children and adolescents improved, and I was able to overcome the literacy limitations presented in most communities. In general, children and young people were “skilful communicators” (Clark, 211, p.338) and not only willingly answered the questions that were posed but also asked me questions in return regarding my feelings and experiences. In this exchange, I learnt from children other ways of communication through body language and coded narratives. For instance, children from Rio Quito and Unión Panamericana were very cautious when talking about NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. They did not refer directly to them, nor did they use the names of the armed organisations. Instead, they referred to them as ‘those guys’, ‘those people’ or ‘those bandits’.

Arrangements regarding children and muchachos(as)’s time and space was crucial to develop the strategies proposed. All the activities took place after children were familiarised with my presence in their territories. Even though imaginative sessions were mostly carried out in schools, due to their involvement in extractive economies, some children were not enrolled in schools and their work schedules needed to be taken into account. Wherever possible, I endeavoured to access children in these settings so as not to interfere with their
usual routines. During all research activities with children an adult or guardian was present. In total, I conducted seven workshops with 116 girls and boys between 8 and 15 years of age in seven mining villages [see Appendix 6].

4.4 Research Ethics

Within the context of UREC, this thesis was classified as high risk given the age of some participants (under-sixteen), and the areas were the study intended to be conducted (conflict-affected regions of Colombia). After submitting a detailed application and having a face-to-face interview with the UREC board of the University of Manchester, ethical approval [16338] was granted on 11th August 2016. This process was fundamental, as it helped me to think about strategies ahead of the conduction of fieldwork to avoid putting myself or the participants at risk. In this section, I discuss the ethical issues I faced during fieldwork and the actions I carried out to comply with ethical research standards.

One of the main challenges faced was the feeling of fear from leaders, officials and community members concerning the research. As discussed in Section 4.2.2, unlicensed mining is a highly sensitive topic due to the involvement of illegal actors and the prosecution of miners. Thus, mining communities are reluctant to allow the presence of outsiders, especially when introducing themselves as investigador(es). In Spanish, the word ‘investigador’ is used to refer to both criminal investigators and academic researchers. To overcome this reluctance, I always introduced myself as a student and as a FISCH’s intern. My affiliation to FISCH also helped me avoid requests for money that some local leaders, unsuccessfully, tried to make as a precondition to visiting mining villages. Moreover, I constantly reassured people that I had no affiliation with law enforcement bodies or the police. Instead, I aimed to understand the experience of children rather than
judge or report the practice of informal mining. Building trust was a slow and challenging process which led me to have differentiated levels of access and trust as mentioned in Section 4.2.3.

Furthermore, the adjustments and negotiations that I undertook with local communities, mentioned in Section 4.2.3, were central to conduct this research ethically. As Abebe and Bessel (2014, p.130) assert, when researching with disadvantaged children from the global south, it is essential to bridge formal ethical guidelines developed in western countries and the local ethos. The inclusion of local ethos involves taking into account moral tenets and beliefs of local communities and their local practices, as well as the position that children hold within their communities. This ethos included, for example, letting under-eighteens participate in the charlas with adults and involving younger children in imaginative sessions. Likewise, it involved conducting charlas at night or during the weekends when participants come back from mine sites so as not to make burdensome claims on their time. Local ethos also included providing time to pray and tell jokes at the beginning of the charlas, as a means of putting participants at ease and showing respect for their ways of doing things, and allowing participants to share their stories at their own pace (Norman, 2009, p.74). Sensitive topics were approached when the participants directly mentioned them, and when they assured me that I could ask further questions. By including the local ethos and by approaching participants with respect I developed rapport which helped to secure the validity and reliability of the data (Barriball and While, 1994, p.332).

Consent was always asked beforehand. In the case of children, I designed a format where both guardians and children had the opportunity to agree by signing with a pen or a fingerprint [See Appendixes 7 and 8]. Although consent forms worked well with academics and officials, some participants were
reluctant to sign written consents due to fear or non-literacy. As it has been the case with other research studies conducted in conflict-affected settings (see Norman, 2009), asking for written consent could be intimidating and counter-productive. Therefore, verbal agreements were granted and registered using a voice recorder. To protect the participants’ anonymity, I used pseudonyms and omitted names of the specific villages. Moreover, I always offered them the possibility to take breaks, withdraw, or skip questions, which helped to create a safe environment where participants’ choices were valued.

In terms of security, I always followed the advice and security protocols established by FISCH, and I reported daily my whereabouts to a trusted contact. Above all, I developed an “intuitive feeling of danger” (Baird, 2018, p.348), based on my own common sense and my progressive local understanding of risky situations and threats associated to mining-and-conflict-affected areas. I was aware of the politics behind community councils and people. Therefore, I quickly learnt to carefully listen before talking, observing and avoid taking part in rumours and gossiping especially in regard to tense situations. However, it was difficult and frustrating witnessing daily injustices and abuses such as widespread corruption, gender violence, child abuse and structural impoverishment without speaking out.

Furthermore, the validation of the data collected was limited. Towards the end of the fieldwork, security conditions shifted due to an increase of armed confrontation between NSAGs, which meant that receiving feedback from local communities on the write-up of research findings was no longer possible. I tried to overcome this drawback by arranging a meeting\(^{51}\) in Quibdó with FISCH and ten leaders from the researched communities to present preliminary findings. The feedback and comments revolved around the need to convey a nuanced

\(^{51}\) On the 2nd of June 2017.
perspective where communities and children are not stigmatised. Although it was difficult to give back to participants, my research positioned children into the agenda of FISCH and some local community councils and so will hopefully benefit those communities in the future. For example, before my departure, FISCH was formulating a project with UNICEF to be implemented with children in three mining districts, using some of the methodologies of my research.

4.5 Reflexivity and interconnected positionalities

This research was conducted from an ethnographic perspective in which I, as a person and as a researcher, play a central role in the way children’s experiences are represented. Therefore, it is central to think critically about the role I played and how my subjectivity, positions, and decisions shaped the results of this research. As Mason (2002, p.7) claims “a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are generating”. The difficulty of detachment is especially relevant given my interconnected positionalities. This study was conducted by me as a 30 year old Colombian, as a scholar, as an unmarried middle-class mestiza, as a lucky scholarship holder, as a former civil servant, and as a human rights defender.

The strategic use of my interconnected positionalities and credentials throughout the fieldwork allowed me to access mining areas and information, and to develop a rapport with participants. As Celestina (2018, p.377) suggests, identifiers are “situational rather than fixed”. Therefore, I used them according to the situation and the context. For instance, I appealed to my Colombian citizenship to get access to information from governmental institutions. In other circumstances, I identified myself as a former civil servant and PhD student to arrange interviews
with officials from NGOs. As Martin-Ortega and Herman (2009, p.238) argue “your research is inevitably conditioned by how you appear to others”.

Being Colombian was an enormous asset as Spanish is my mother language, which improved my possibilities of rapport and understanding. Likewise, I am familiarised with the history and the politics of Colombia, and I also had previous contacts given my seven years of working experience as a human rights defender. However, being Colombian also implied a clear cultural bias as doing this type of research was so close to my emotional and political convictions. As Celestina (2018, p.379) suggests, the possibility of being neutral during fieldwork is debatable especially when witnessing injustices in conflict-affected areas. Therefore, it is reasonable and even expected to take sides in the process of building trust. During the fieldwork, I took sides in the sense that I agreed with the importance of acknowledging that childhood comes in different shapes and that it is possible to be a child in constrained environments. But, at the same time, I showed disapproval of the physical and verbal violence inflicted on children within their communities. It is relevant to mention that despite my disagreement with several local practices, I did not get involved in local tensions and gossiping. Doing so would have hindered this research and my presence in mining areas.

Nevertheless, being Colombian was not enough. As a mestiza, I was placed from the beginning as an outsider from Afro-Colombian communities. Being mestiza reflected weakness, low resistance to sunlight, physical activity and the vicissitudes of mining, which is partially correct. Despite my good physical condition, I was not used to the humidity of Chocó, the food, or walking long distances wearing plastic boots to reach mines. Indeed, I was a learner on the go. Likewise, my time in Quibdó was challenging due to the lack of recreational activities and frequent curfews established by criminal organisations. I had to learn how to deal with sadness, loneliness and frustration by trying to balance
the PhD research and my personal life. So, I started practicing yoga at my temporary home and took some breaks where I had time to visit my friends and family in Bogota.

High levels of machismo characterise Afro-descendant communities in Chocó, especially in mining areas where men are the primary workforce. Thus, I frequently dealt with sexist comments and flirting. Although I never felt unsafe or sexually harassed, I learnt how to deal with comments and how to establish clear boundaries with men. At that time, I did not have children or a husband. As it is uncommon to find an unmarried thirty years old lady in mining areas, at first, they did not take me seriously. Women were particularly worried about my ‘failure as a woman’ and my personal life in general. In rural communities, it is common to have big families and to share details of people’s personal lives, so everyone is free to make comments or pass judgment. I felt that for them this is the foundation of solidarity. Although I found it particularly difficult, I chose to relax and consider this an opportunity to learn from their perspectives about family, childhood and the role of children in those areas. On the other hand, being a woman was also an opportunity as trust was clearly gendered. Since gold mining is predominantly a male activity, I was not seen as a threat, and my interest in children was welcomed.

Due to my experience as a well-educated person from Bogota studying abroad, some people thought I was a foreigner due to my affiliation to the University of Manchester and some also had a preconceived view of me as a naïve person. However, this ‘naivety’, as mentioned above, played in my favour as people perceived me as someone willing to learn instead of being a suspicious person. In other cases, I was identified as a teacher, which gave the opportunity of gaining respect and validation from local communities. However, at no point was I treated as a local. I was clearly an outsider and, despite my time in mining
communities, I was not even considered as a ‘partial insider’. Nevertheless, people opened their lives and homes to let me stay, acknowledging and accepting my presence as an outsider. They fed me and provided me with basic accommodation refusing to accept any payment, which made feel grateful but at the same time uneasy as I did not want to abuse their kindness. In some communities of Bebarama, they had facilities for visitors but, in most places, I relied on the local leaders’ generosity. The levels of solidarity were impressive.

As a researcher, I also looked for validation from children and muchachos(as). It was a process in which my personality, gender, curiosity and sense of humour were at play. Some children made fun of my accent and even my body language. My clothes and the type of mobile phone I had also mediated validation of me as a person by young participants because, again, they laughed at them. Without this type of interaction, I would not have noticed the importance of conspicuous consumption or their conception of ‘successful adults’. As Emond (2005, p.137) points out, using participatory approaches with children implies that we (as researchers) “have to take personal risks: to sing, to tell jokes, to be questioned about our views or personal lives”. Trust was developed by allowing young participants to poke fun and, also, by taking time to play and interact with them. I learnt a great deal about children’s lives by playing, swimming and doing house chores with them. Although this study recognises the validity of children’s accounts, as mentioned in Section 4.1, building trust with children helped to reduce the risk (that also exist with adults) of lies, evasions or attempts to create positive impressions when eliciting their views (Punch, 2000, p.328). In developing rapport, children felt comfortable and, therefore, acted more naturally when expressing their accounts in group discussions.

In sum, my interconnected positionalities were both a hindrance and an asset. I faced cultural bias, perceived weakness and machismo but, at the same time,
those obstacles helped me to gain access to communities, to develop rapport, build trust and learn from the experience of mining communities. Moreover, all my positionalities played a role in the way I analysed data as discussed in the next section.

4.6 Data analysis

Framed on a constructivist approach to research, the analysis of the data gathered was developed inductively, based on the information collected and the subsequent variables that arose from it (Creswell, 2009, p.9). In other words, this study is greatly inspired by grounded theory methods in which “data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct” (Charmaz, 2014, p.3). Data does not only refer to the information provided by the participants, but it also includes our observations and experiences as researchers. Although the empirical information also allows inquiry into the conceptual underpinnings of childhood, child labour and humanitarian assistance, the primary objective was to explore the experiences of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas instead of testing a specific theory. The analysis of data did not only take place after the fieldwork. It was an active, simultaneous and continuous process carried out throughout the research. From the outset, I identified recurrent themes, contradictions, and areas requiring further revision, while also creating preliminary codes (Charmaz, 2014, p.4). The constellation of research methods applied alongside my own experience produced a large amount of data. Therefore, organising and coding the information during the research process were essential to later stages of in-depth analysis.
Drawing on Schatzman and Strauss (1973, p.99), I codified my field notes into observational (green), methodological (orange), and theoretical (pink) [see Photograph 11]. This initial organisation allowed me to make preliminary interpretations, reflect on the methods used and adapt them accordingly, as well as making connections and creating concepts. This classification was significantly useful during later stages of organisation and analysis of the empirical data. Moreover, given the research questions of this study, I assigned numbers to my field notes according to the three main areas of inquiry, as follows: i) Critical definition of childhood, vulnerability and conflict; ii) children’s roles during armed conflict and iii) institutional responses to children.

After the fieldwork was completed, all the audio recordings of interviews, charlas and imaginative sessions were transcribed and compared with notes taken during semi-participant observation. All the transcriptions and notes were printed for manual coding. In practice, this form of coding involved reading the material multiple times, making notes in the margins, and identifying themes and patterns of meaning using coloured highlighters and a pen [see Photograph 12]. Unlike computing software for qualitative analysis, this old-school manual or human coding allowed me to ‘own the data’, contextualise it, frame it into a
bigger picture and navigate through it in a way that I could not achieve through a computer screen (Saldaña, 2016, p.30).

Photograph 12: Manual coding of participatory research methods (The author, 2018)

The codification of the information helped me to create categories and subcategories to organise the vast amount of data collected, which later became concepts and themes that aided in answering the research questions. This study has not engaged in a word-based analysis which, although efficient when analysing large amounts of written text, could be reductionist. Word-based
analysis usually looks at recurrent words without considering the context in which they are produced (MacQueen and Namey, 2012, p.10). Thus, this is a content-driven thesis in which the data defined the paths of analysis.

During the writing up process, I faced two significant challenges. The first was to translate into academic English some of the local and vernacular expressions shared by participants. I tried to be as faithful as possible to original accounts by using local expressions in Spanish when the translation did not capture the original complexity of the words used (e.g., muchachos(as), barequero, charla). The second was to translate the complex and contradictory reality into academic language. As George and Bennet (2004, p.114) suggest, “theory should be as complicated as all our evidence suggest”. After several drafts and unsuccessful attempts to explain the experience of young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas in rigid analytical boxes, I realised that embracing the ‘messiness’ of the field was actually central to comprehending the lives of children in those contexts more accurately.

This study does not aim to prove that certain statements are more accurate than others, or that adult’s accounts have more value than those produced by children. Instead, I take “children’s voice seriously acknowledging their active participation in social life” (Boyden and Berry, 2004, p.xxiii) and seek to explain their multiple experiences in volatile contexts. Therefore, the data gathered was supplemented – rather than triangulated – with reports and document analysis. However, I acknowledge the fact that although this study revolves around children; it was not written by children. This thesis was produced by me as an adult researcher interested in children’s experiences (Wells, 2009, p.15; Punch, 3000, p.322). I present children and adults accounts as complementary (Greene ad Hill, 2005, p.7) and socially and culturally framed. That is, drawing on Alldred and Burman’s discourse analysis (2005, p.176), I situate children’s and adults’ accounts in relation to what was possible for them to say, given the constrained
conditions of mining-and-conflict-affected areas, and what was possible for me, as a Colombian-female-researcher to hear from them.

4.7 Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed why the methodology implemented was appropriate to address the research questions given the constructivist epistemological paradigm that frame the study. Drawing on the composite (Barakat et al., 2002) and mosaic (Clark and Moss, 2001) approaches to inform my methodological perspective, I argue that the issues that arose when researching with children in conflict-affected areas could be overcome by combining complementary methods which bring together multiple perceptions to understand children’s actions. Using Chocó as a single case study, this research privileged the use of participant-centred methods which provided rich and in-depth insights into the lives of children and young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Moreover, I explained how I accessed the different groups of participants and how decisions were made given the constraints in the field, such as distrust, non-literacy, and insecurity.

The study is situated under the academic umbrella of ethnography, given the aim to convey the reality of working children whilst validating the subjectivity of all participants, the time spent in the field, and the level of interaction with mining communities. As such, this research aims to show the multiplicity of lived experiences of children in constrained environments, rather than an objective and generalised reality. Through this content-driven method of analysis, the findings can expand our knowledge of the experience of children, their roles and the humanitarian interventions to assist them. Throughout this chapter, I reflected on the research process, the challenges arising when collecting data using various
methods and groups of participants, the ethical dilemmas faced, and how my interconnected positionalities informed the analysis of such a vast amount of data, as well as the representation of children and mining communities. In the following chapters, I analyse the empirical data starting with the social constructions of childhood, vulnerability and agency in mining-and-conflict-affected areas.
**Above:** Boy disembarking construction material (The author, 2017)

**Above:** Young ex-combatant 34th Front FARC-EP (The author, 2017)

**Below:** Conspicuous consumption. Boys driving a fellow muchacho’s motorbike (The author, 2017)

Visiting a fully mechanised mine in Bebarama (The author, 2017)

Visiting a semi-mechanised mine in Union Panamericana (Local miner, 2017)
Boys playing spinning tops at night (The author, 2017)

Informal conversations while children and women wash dishes (The author, 2017)

Children playing and swimming in the Bebarama river (The author, 2017)
Are child labourers badly miscast as those with a lost childhood?

Critical approaches to childhood and agency in mining-and-conflict-affected areas

Introduction

Chronological age and vulnerability have been the pillars of modern conceptualisations of childhood. Legal frameworks and international conventions\(^{52}\) adopted by most countries, including Colombia,\(^{53}\) have defined children as any human being below the age of eighteen. Furthermore, as highlighted in Chapter Two, UN agencies have described the ideal childhood as a treasurable time in life characterised by love, play, caring adults, and schooling, where violence and exploitative labour do not have room (UNICEF, 2005). Therefore, any association of children with exploitative labour or armed actors seems reprehensible, violating, and an act of deceit or negligence. In summary, child labour in mines and armed fighting are rendered as ‘unchildlike’ situations that imply the loss or end of childhood (Aitken, 2001).

This idyllic conceptualisation, although practical from a legal and institutional perspective, does not provide enough room for the recognition and inclusion of other representations of childhood and agency that take place in conflict-

\(^{52}\) Such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989)

\(^{53}\) Article 3 of Law 1098/ 2006.
affected areas. As discussed in Chapter Two, the discursive homogenisation of children as vulnerable and immature subjects overlooks and invalidates processes of negotiation, adaptation and tactical decision-making occurring in areas where illegality, conflict, and a life of toil are entangled. In order to analyse the construction of “plural childhoods” (Frønes, 1993, p.1) in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, and to examine the extent that its defining features differ from mainstream conceptualisations, this chapter directs attention towards analysing the everyday practices, decision-making, and narratives of children and adults with respect to themselves, armed actors, gold mining, and their environment.

This chapter returns to the academic debates, highlighted in Chapter Two, concerning the limitations of legal and institutional representations of childhood that suggest, regardless of the socio-economic conditions of children, that a desirable childhood ends when dangerous work begins. Furthermore, the present chapter addresses debates about the practical and academic constraints of assuming vulnerability and passivity as inherent characteristics of children. The scope of analysis is twofold. Firstly, it centres on the social and cultural construction of childhood and vulnerability in the researched areas and, in doing so, shows that the involvement of children with work and armed actors does not necessarily conflict with their enjoyment of childhood. Secondly, the study examines the capacity of choice and agency of children and young people with regard to labour in mines and their involvement with NSAGs. This part of the chapter demonstrates the need to recognise children and young people from mining-and-conflict-affected areas as active participants of their political, economic and social environment.

The chapter begins by analysing activities and roles performed by children within their families and communities, their views regarding those roles, and
their inter- and intra-generational relationships, as well as the negotiations that take place regarding chronological age. The analytical lens I use draws on the concept of ‘social age’ proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009, p.1310), and introduced in Chapter Two. After illustrating the cultural and social-division structures and power relationships where children and young people are embedded, the second section of this chapter examines how they act inside and against those structures as co-producers of representations, decisions and realities (Christensen and Prout, 2005, p.51). To do so, I use the concept of tactical agency proposed by Honwana (2005) and developed in Chapter Two.

The examination of the construction of the social age of children, carried out during the fieldwork, reinforces the idea of childhood as “an open-ended process of adult formation” (Utas, 2004, p.211) which is not bounded by chronological age. In this process, labour in mines, as well as the exposure to and relationships with armed actors, owners of illegal mining sites, and intervention agencies, have shaped children’s experiences. These findings demonstrate that in specific settings, work and armed conflict are not necessarily an antithesis of modern childhoods. At the same time, they also show how the legal definition of children that is present in the policy and NGO world is not necessarily alien to mining communities. Indeed, it has been tactically merged with local conceptions, and sometimes adopted to get access to services or to reduce the stigmatisation of ASGM as an illegal activity where children take part.

Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates that despite the constraints that operate in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, children from those settings are agents who make choices within the limited range of possibilities available to them (Punch, 2004, p.104; James, 2007; Drumbl, 2010, p.223). Notwithstanding inherent limitations and difficult decision-making processes, those children
have not lost their childhood. The accounts, but especially the observed practices of young participants and children, show the permanent negotiation of levels of interdependence and autonomy in regard to gold mining and their interaction with NSAGs.

5.1 Social age and local perspectives of childhood

In the mining villages of Chocó, participation in ASGM is a characteristic feature of local communities that do not place labour outside the realm of childhood. Children are expected to work and support mining activities but, locally, that work is not seen as the end of childhood. For instance, when asked to speak about her experience as an artisanal miner, Maria explained that she has been mining since before she was born.54 This 61 year-old lady asserted that her mother, like many women in Chocó, worked in ASGM even during her pregnancies. Similarly, during an interview, Emilio, the legal representative of a community council in Unión Panamericana, recalled that he has been working in mining ever since he can remember.55 Personal accounts like these and narratives concerning the involvement of people in mining from a very early age in different roles and capacities were commonplace during the fieldwork. The idea of lifelong attachment to ASGM is explained by the representation of this practice as a traditional, ancestral, cultural and economic activity that has been present in the life of Afro-descendant communities in Colombia since the 16th century Spanish colonisation (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.47).

Although Afro-descendant communities mainly pinpoint their cultural heritage and traditions as one of the main reasons for the participation of children in gold mining, they also acknowledge that the motivations, roles and systems of

55 Interview, 8 December 2016.
involvement of young people in mining have changed. This has become the case especially since NSAGs and foreign owners of machinery started to control mining sites. The exposure of children and their communities to armed conflict and the accelerated mechanisation of mining have influenced the experience of young people as well as the social expectations and constructions of childhood. Understanding how plural childhoods are lived and constructed in mining- and-conflict-affected areas is crucial to shedding light to guide development programming as well as aiding current academic efforts to understand experiences of children in conflict-affected settings.

The conceptualisation of ‘social age’ proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009) facilitates the analysis of these transformations and the understanding of how these have reframed and adapted the experiences and local meanings attached to childhood. As discussed in Chapter Two, ‘social age’ is a comprehensive concept that echoes the academic approaches made from the sociology of childhood (Eyster and Ager, 2004; Reynolds, 2004; Roshani, 2013; James and Prout, 2015), and supplements legal and institutional mainstream conceptualisations that define childhood based on chronological age. This concept helps to provide contextualised representations of childhood and youth by taking into account generational relationships with peers and adults, roles attributed and performed by children and young people, and “socially constructed meanings applied to physical development” (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p.1310). On the other hand, if the analysis focuses on children as isolated agents, there is a risk of overlooking their socialisation that is crucial to understand the issues children face in any setting.

Drawing on Clark-Kazak (2009), this section examines local interpretations ascribed to physical development and inter-/intra- generational relationships, as well as social markers like economic independence and parenthood. As
discussed in Chapter Two, in this analysis, I expand the concept of ‘social age’ proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009), by introducing the examination of the relationship of children and young people with NSAGs and the managers of non-legalised semi-and fully mechanised mining sites (locally known under the prestigious label of ‘mining entrepreneurs’\textsuperscript{56}). It is important to clarify that the analysis provided does not aim to depict a homogenised picture of the experience of children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Conversely, it acknowledges the differences between the three researched areas – Unión Panamericana, Bebarama and Rio Quito – especially in regard to the levels of development, institutional intervention and presence of NSAGs. Indeed, the primary research contributes to the development of the notion of plural childhoods (Frønes, 1993, p.1) which recognises that the experiences of children from the same context, and even from the same family, are shaped differently by the entwinement of gender, class, as well as cultural, social, political and economic conditions.

5.1.1 Social connotations of physical development of children

In the areas where I carried out my fieldwork, as in many other multicultural communities, the category of ‘adolescence’ is not used in the common language, and its conception is not clear. In these places, childhood and adulthood “are the two defining phases in the life cycle” (Eyber and Ager, 2004. p197). As mentioned in Chapter Four, after puberty, locals refer to children as jóvenes (youths) or muchachos (lads) / muchachas (lasses). When I used the Spanish word for either ‘adolescence’ or ‘adolescents’\textsuperscript{57} during the initial research activities, the participants always asked for clarification. They explained that they are familiar with these concepts that are mainly used by governmental organisations and international agencies, but I found that adolescence is not an

\textsuperscript{56} Empresarios mineros.

\textsuperscript{57} Adolescencia or adolescentes
intelligible concept used in their everyday. This perception of childhood is fundamental because the term muchachos(as) is a broader concept that includes a transition between childhood and adulthood, but is also a flexible appellation that is not determined by age but by social roles. In order to reflect local perspectives as closely as possible to the local accounts, the category of muchachos/muchachas is used in this chapter (and the whole study) to refer to adolescents and young people.

Mining communities consider childhood as a time in life that takes place before puberty, and it is characterised by dependence on adults, play, unawareness and vulnerability. The word niños (children) is always used by adults to refer to babies and those who have not reached pubescence. Although there are not specific rites of initiation to adulthood, puberty is an important social turning point especially if pregnancy take place. Children are highly valued and families without children are described by other families as empty, with no sense, and a failure in life. Adults in all the researched areas perceive children as valuable especially when they are in their early years of life, and they are normally described as active, obedient and cheerful.58 However, as one of the leaders from Bebarama stated during a charla, the innate innocence of small children makes them a common target for NSAGs who use them to get information as “they are the most innocent and ignorant [naive]”.59

Finding a partner and becoming pregnant are features of adulthood that are not attached to chronological age. One of the leaders of Unión Panamericana explained that:

Childhood ends when the woman becomes pregnant or when the man impregnates a woman. If you become pregnant at the age of 15, you are no longer a child. It is the age when you assume a greater degree of

59 Charla, adults, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
responsibility; it is not a problem of age but of the responsibility that is acquired.""  

Children from Bebarama share this perception. When asked when they thought childhood ends, some of their answers were as follows: “When I have my woman”\(^{61}\); “when one has children”\(^{62}\); or “when one is 15 and starts to look for a girlfriend”\(^{63}\). The physical changes of puberty and their associations with responsibility and procreation are two critical variables that differentiate adults from children in local communities.

Procreation is closely related to the idea that males, regardless of their age, become economically responsible for their partners and new-borns. Likewise, it implies the social acceptance of cohabitation as a couple. As Ricardo points out “the one who impregnates a woman should support her financially”.\(^{64}\) When talking about pregnancies, during a charla, Yuli recalled her experience with her first child: “I was 13 when I had my first daughter, and I moved in with him [her daughter’s father] at once, it was not like ‘stay with your mom’. I wanted to live with my husband. Why would I stay there? [At her parent’s house]”.\(^{65}\) Although Yuli refers to her daughter’s father as ‘husband’, legal or formal marriages are not a widespread practice. In most cases, young couples cohabitate in the house of one of the in-laws until they are financially able to live independently. Identifying social expectations regarding parenthood is central to understanding the notion of childhood and the transition made towards adulthood as responsible beings. Likewise, it helps to explain why some young males decide to work.

60 Charla, adults, Unión Panamericana, 20 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
61 Imaginative session, Male participant, Bebarama, 11 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
62 Imaginative session, Female participant, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
63 Imaginative session, Male participant, Bebarama, 11 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
64 Charla, adults, Unión Panamericana, 20 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
65 Charla, female adults, Bebarama, 09 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
The social connotations of children’s physical development are gender-specific (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p. 1314). Physical strength is a significant turning point towards male adulthood. As men are the primary workforce in mining sites, especially semi-and fully mechanised mining, physical attributes gained through puberty affects their social roles. Although children are involved in ancillary tasks around mining from an early age, when they are physically developed for ‘proper mining’ they are regarded as young adults or muchachos(as). Therefore, the perceptions regarding the minimum age to work in mining sites are not homogenous.

Adults and young people in Chocó consistently said that children are allowed to do mining when they are ‘big enough’ or during their holidays. When I specifically asked how they decide if a child is ‘big enough’, most answers refer the social age to work as being in a range from ten to fourteen years old as well as the importance of physical abilities. Some muchachos reflected that it is important to be strong in order to be able to escape from potential landslides, resist long workdays, and lift heavy stuff. As Felipe, in Bebarama, mentioned “sometimes you can get a job because you are young, a job that an old man cannot do […] as long as you are young and able to lift heavy things you can work”. A male counterpart from Rio Quito shares the perception of Felipe; Julio explained that if a weak muchacho arrives at a semi-mechanised mining site asking for a job, he would not be accepted. “It depends what he looks like – if he seems weak or not. It is possible that he’s given a work opportunity, but it takes time. It depends on your performance, if you work well you can stay; otherwise, you should leave”. These accounts demonstrate that in mining settings strength rather than age is a critical feature of male adulthood and an essential determinant of social status as a suitable miner.

66 Charla, adults, Bebarama, 27 March 2017
67 Charla, mixed adults and muchachos, Bebarama, 27 March 2017.
68 Charla, mixed adults and muchachos, Bebarama, 8 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
69 Charla, mixed adults and muchachos, Rio Quito, 09 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
Meanwhile, the physical development of girls during the same part of their life cycle has different connotations in the social construction of their age. Traditionally, as mentioned earlier, the transition towards adulthood during puberty is quicker in the case of pregnancy. However, single female adolescents, who are economically dependent on their parents or without children, remain in an ‘in-between’ stage until they find a partner. However, the arrival of foreign miners, mestizos and NSAGs in mining villages changed the social meanings ascribed to maternity and sexually active muchachas. Local people blame armed actors and foreigners for early pregnancies and single parenting, as well as the loss of rituals and Afro-Colombian traditions in new generations. Single mothers are stuck in transit to adulthood as they became economically vulnerable and heavily dependent on their relatives.

Moreover, the lack of jobs for females in semi-and fully mechanised mining sites, as highlighted in Chapter Six, has forced some young mothers to migrate to other cities in the search for jobs, or even to get involved in prostitution. In Rio Quito and Unión Panamericana, young participants asserted that NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs manage brothels and bars where some muchachas are sexually exploited. Mining communities face practical and moral constraints accessing contraception, sexual education, and health facilities. According to one of the local nurses, although abortions are rare, the number of young people with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and teen pregnancies has increased dramatically in recent years. Young prostitutes and those affected by STDs are not locally defined within the span of childhood.

In summary, understanding how children’s gender intersects with power relationships and the division of labour helps to challenge universalistic
perspectives of childhood, based on chronological age, which overlook the
diverse positions of children and young people according to their ethnicity,
religion, gender or class (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p. 1314), as well as their life
experiences. In the next subsection, intergenerational relationships and the
family division of labour in which children’s lives are embedded are analysed.

5.1.2 The social division of labour

Examination of the division of labour within generations as proposed by Clark-
Kazak (2009, p.1317) is central to understanding power relationships within
families and communities, as well as decision making of children and adults in
regard to work and income generation. Children typically are part of large
families and support others in fulfilling their roles that, although unpaid, are
highly valued. They are important actors in the functioning of their households,
but also within their communities. They take part in social life by being present
at meetings, football tournaments and social events, as well as by rendering
services to adults.

The relationships of interdependence forged between children and adults in the
research areas challenges mainstream conceptions of child dependency. As
Hockey and James (1993 in Punch, 2004, p.94) state “adult’s and children’s lives
are interrelated at many different levels; adults are often not fully independent
beings”. Due to the dynamics of mining, where parents are normally working
and living away from the family home, the division of labour between adults
and children is indispensable to family functioning. The dynamics of family life
are shaped by necessity and political economy. According to the accounts
gathered from the three research areas, girls and boys help with household
activities from an early age, as well as undertaking income-generating activities
such as gold mining, the sale of fish and fruits in local markets, farming, animal
husbandry, and fishing. The most common tasks undertaken in supporting
roles are cleaning, folding clothes, dishwashing, babysitting, cooking, running errands, cutting wood and putting clothes out to dry. Adults and children consider domestic chores as ‘formative work’ that contributes to children’s education towards responsible adulthood. As one of the women from Bebarama pointed out: “a child of 10 years and older is already a child who must learn to do his things because he will not live with dad and mum all the time […]. At 12 years old he can already set up his pot or fry his plantain”.73 This ‘collaboration’, as it was labelled by various research participants during the research activities, is essential for household maintenance, making adults rely significantly on the children and muchachos(as) under their care.

This idea of children learning to become adults is further illustrated in the way that autonomy, solidarity, and self-sufficiency became essential values transmitted to children to overcome the challenges faced when ASGM was altered due to the arrival of NSAGs and to the proliferation of semi-and fully mechanised mining. As explained in Chapter Three, violence and the predatory nature of illegal mining destroyed most of the ASGM sites and produced two types of migrations: 1) Internal forced displacements caused by violence inflicted by NSAGs on local communities and mining entrepreneurs. 2) The economic migration of local miners towards other mining regions in search of gold or stable jobs. These forms of migration makes long-distant parenting commonplace. Parents who work on dragon dredgers usually visit their families once or twice per month, reducing their parenting involvement to the provision of economic resources.74 In other cases, families stay with their babies at semi-mechanised sites in makeshift camps until they can walk and are sent back to their villages with extended family members.75 Similarly, some children are left for up to one day, two weeks or a month alone, with neighbours,

73 Charla, adults, Bebarama, 28 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
74 Interview, Flor, Rio Quito, 2 May 2017.
75 Informal conversation, Female miner, Bebarama, 26 March 2017.
teachers or relatives while their parents are mining. As one of the local teachers from Bebarama reflects:

Here the muchachos help a lot – working together with their parents. And sometimes when the parents leave for the mine and stay there for four or five days, they stay at home doing their domestic chores. Well, lunch is sacred in the school restaurant, and in the evenings the children, the bigger ones, prepare their food in their houses. When parents leave for 15 days in a month, they leave them under the supervision of a neighbour. In some cases, children stay with me for four or five days, we all sleep together here. We are very supportive in that sense; they are not left there to do what they want, there is always an adult keeping an eye on them.  

The accounts shared by this local teacher clearly demonstrate the synergy between adults and children and the importance of the division of labour within families and communities. It also shows that children can perform adult roles whilst still being regarded as children in need of protection. Moreover, her accounts, as well as the explanations shared by other women, exemplify how broad the concept of family as a social unit could be in the researched contexts. These findings empirically contradict mainstream discourses that identify all children as inherently vulnerable whereas, in these areas, children are not depicted as permanently dependent beings. Therefore, the values of autonomy and self-sufficiency of children are central to their lives. The next subsection further exemplifies this plurality of values while examining the intergenerational relationships between adults and children beyond the social division of labour.

5.1.3 Inter- and intra-generational relationships

The relationships that children forge with adults, as well as with their peers, are central to an examination of social age and local conceptualisations of

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76 Interview, Teacher, Bebarama, 21 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
childhood (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p.1310). By analysing the interaction with others, as well as perceptions of and from children, it is possible to understand power relationships, tensions, and the levels of the agency in decision-making processes that further illustrate the complex understandings and realities of childhood.

As discussed in the previous subsection, joint work and synergy are present in the interactions between children and adults in the social division of labour. However, this does not mean that their relationships are always harmonious or that hierarchies do not exist. Adults exercise authority, discipline, and control over children. Nonetheless, this authority generally takes place within conflicting situations that usually feature maltreatment. Coupled with the coercion exerted by NSAGs and illegal actors, parents, neighbours and even some teachers continuously inflict physical punishment and verbal abuse on children. For example, parents who arrive home from mines usually beat older children if younger siblings are unattended or crying. As a 12-year-old boy reflected: “I do not like to take care of my younger siblings, it is very tiring, one has to clean and clean, they cry, and one gets desperate [...] one gets beaten for any reason”.

A child is the one whom an adult can control or even against whom violence is used. Therefore, their entrance into the adulthood span takes place when adults no longer have control over them. Nevertheless, the journey towards adulthood is not always smooth or without tensions between adults and children. After puberty, when children have grown significantly and physical or verbal abuse are no longer effective in disciplining them, some adults depict muchachos(as) as rebellious, challenging to educate, headstrong, lost or unruly. This is especially the case when long-distance parenting occurs. Adults expressed

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78 Imaginative session, mixed children, Bebarama, 13 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
feelings of frustration and powerlessness regarding their muchachos’ decisions. In general, locals perceive muchachos(as) to be in the span of adulthood as they can make their own life choices, as the reflections shared by Mariela, an ASGM miner with six children all involved in gold mining, demonstrate:

I have heard that the muchachos supposedly become grown-ups when they reach the age of eighteen, but they do what they want before that. My older son is 16 years old, and he is waiting to leave home as soon as possible. My other children decided as from their young age that they did not want to study and there has been no human power to force them to return to school.79

Mariela’s description illustrates how adulthood not only begins with pregnancies or physical strength. It also starts when children decide to do full-time work, drop out of schooling or leave their homes. Muchachos(as) and children echoed these ideas during imaginative sessions by referring to working as a feature of adulthood. As Miguel, in Bebarama, said “you are almost a man when you work, play and study. I am 15 years old, and I feel almost like an adult”.80 A similar feeling was shared by Angelica in Rio Quito when she said that “one grows up when one can work, buy one’s own things and find a husband”.81 Thus, productive roles and economic independence, especially through gold mining, are socially ascribed to the stage of adulthood.

The intra-generational relationships between children and muchachos(as) from mining-and-conflict-affected areas are also framed by the migratory processes they face. Economic and school migration has produced a generational gap in mining communities. During weekdays, muchachos(as) enrolled in secondary school in other towns and those – mostly young males - who undertake full-time work in semi-and fully mechanised mining are absent from their

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79 Informal conversation, 13 December 2016, Unión Panamericana [Author’s translation].
80 Imaginative session, mixed children, 2 February 2017, Bebarama, Chocó [Author’s translation].
81 Charla, mixed adults and muchachos(as), Rio Quito, 9 May 2016 [Author’s translation].
communities. This gap is only reduced during weekends or school holidays when miners and students come back to their villages. However, although miners and students gather together at these specific times of the year, only full-time workers are regarded as grownups. Economic independence and full-time work signify the end of childhood for some. Unlike children that combine their studies with sporadic work in mines, these full-time miners do not have dual status as weekly workers and weekend children.

The migratory dynamics, as well as the sexual division of labour in mechanised mining, have reframed intra-gender relationships. Muchachas usually stay at the mining villages as they are not commonly hired in mechanised mining. They form close bonds among themselves which are essential for child rearing, the provision of food, leisure activities and domestic chores. On the other hand, muchacho miners built close relationships of solidarity among themselves, in part thanks to the teamwork that mechanised and semi-mechanised mining imply. In mining-and-conflict-affected areas, similarly to the experiences of young refugees and asylum seekers in London (Wells, 2011, p.327) and child domestic workers in India (Wasiuzzaman and Wells, 2010, p.283), the webs of support – as well as strong and weak ties – are essential. These connections, between peers and adults, as further discussed in Section 5.2, enable access to resources, friendship, knowledge, influences, circuits of works, and social recognition. Moreover, in the research areas, alliances and social networks are necessary to deal with the hazards of extracting gold, spending months isolated in mining sites, or getting a job – whether this is in mechanised mining or other roles, particularly when they are under the control of NSAGs.

As analysed in Chapter Six, it is muchachos who are typically hired in mechanised mining. Therefore, their construction of masculine identities, adulthood, reputation and social prestige is closely connected with their
capacity for conspicuous consumption, as well as their economic capacity to afford parties and alcohol in order to socialise with their female counterparts (McDowell, 2003 in Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, p.105; Cuvelier, 2017, p.211; Bourdillon, 2006, p.1214). According to local narratives and personal observation, the increasing alcohol and drug consumption among children, as early as twelve and fourteen years old, has triggered their earlier maturation. As discussed in Subsection 5.1.1, maternity and a sexually active life are features of adulthood, therefore, the increasing muchacho(a)-headed households, single-parenting, STDs, early pregnancies, and prostitution are the situations mining communities identified as the adult-like problems that youngsters currently face.

The analysis of intra- and inter-relationships in the focalised areas enhance our understanding of the dynamic construction of age. This study indicates that tensions, social recognition of economic power, intra-gender relationships, and migratory processes condition the meanings ascribed to childhood and adulthood. The next subsection examines the impact on local perceptions of social age produced by interactions with intervention agencies.

5.1.4 Interaction with intervention agencies and NGOs

The constant interaction and exposure to values and ideas connected with child-protection frames have affected the way locals portray children to external agencies and construct discourses around them. Leaders and members of the community councils are well organised and have long histories of interacting with officials from governmental institutions, aid agencies and NGOs. The adaptation of their discourses shows the incorporation of the child rights language into local documents and discourse as a social tactic used by some to ensure access to services and to reduce stigmatisation around the illegality of mining.
As examined in Chapter Seven, the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) led to international aid agencies and policies regarding children in Chocó to prioritise access to primary education and the reduction of under-five mortality rate. However, the concomitant over-attention to early and middle childhood created hierarchies between children and decreased the attention on adolescents. As Marina mentioned during a charla “the officials from the early childhood programme have come sometimes. They gave some food to one of my sons, but they did not take into account the others […] they have not given anything this year, they came only once but just to visit”. The chronological division of children established by intervention agencies made adults and parents from mining villages aware of the political efficacy to present their children as such in order to receive food supplies, state subsidies and services. As Jaime explains it: “the money from ‘Más Familias in Acción’ [Governmental Programme] is sent but is for children, they are paid according to the number of children that you register”. Thus, the particular emphasis that is given by agencies and local authorities on early and middle school age children has had the side effect of reinforcing local perceptions of children as only those who have not reached puberty.

It is important to notice that local narratives regarding childhood are not entirely isolated from the universal child discourse discussed in Chapter Two. The relevance of protecting ‘menores de edad’ (minors) is actually a powerful paradigm that was tactically included and negotiated in the accounts and practices of adults and children from the focal areas. Some of the accounts shared by children in Unión Panamericana and Bebarama pointed out the age of 18 as the signpost of growing up into adults. This age-related idea was referred to like something they had learnt at school or saw in the media.

82 Charla, adults, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
83 Charla, adults, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
However, there are visible tensions between the formal discourse of childhood and local practices. During one of the visits to Bebarama, leaders listed the names and identification numbers of active miners within their communities. The list was requested by a mining entrepreneur, who also works as an official in the local major’s office of the region, who assured the leaders that it was needed for the legalisation process. During the census, locals discussed if 15-year-old Miguel should be listed or not. The case of Miguel opened an informal discussion about the convenience of making the participation of muchachos visible to authorities. Alma, one of the leaders warned about the complications that this may create by saying: “we are complacent and let them go [be part of the workforce in unlicensed mines] because they are 14 and 15 years old, but these muchachos cannot be included in any list especially if it is official and goes to the Major of Medio Atrato”. Likewise, during a charla, women discussed the participation of children in gold mining making visible the disagreement between narratives and practices:

Author: “What do you think about the participation of children in mining?”
Woman 1: “Minors cannot go”
Woman 2: “Youths can go but underage cannot, it is forbidden. It is not legal that they go”
Woman 3: “Yes, but they go anyway!”
Woman 1: “Yes, but it is because they do not have other sources of income”
Woman 2: “I don’t think that they would completely leave it even if they have another source of income”.

These accounts clearly illustrate local communities’ awareness of legal restrictions regarding child labour and some of the contradictions that they face.

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84 Informal conversation, Local leader, Bebarama, 8 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
85 Charla, female adults, Bebarama, 09 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
in practice. This is especially the case in communities aiming to legalise their mines and mining practices, claiming their ethnic rights as afro-descendant communities to do so. They are aware of the potential problems of recognising the participation and presence of under-18s in their mines. Leaders and miners have been told by authorities that in order to legalise their economic activity, they should ensure that ‘minors’ are not involved at any capacity. However, as this chapter illustrates locals have a different interpretation of what a minor is.

Institutional language has been adjusted to local practices where children start to get involved in the extraction of gold and other related activities when they are between ten and twelve years old. In 2011, mining entrepreneurs and ASGM miners, (i.e., barequeros), created an association in Bebarama called ASOBAMINARMEA. One of the commanders of the 34th Front of FARC-EP explained in an interview that, by acting as mediators between mining entrepreneurs and barequeros, they helped local miners to create this association and set basic rules for the functioning of gold mining. In Article 22 of these regulations, they banned children under the age of ten from entering the mining sites (ASOBAMINARMEA, 2016). It was clear, from informal conversations I held with members of this Association, that the inclusion of a restriction for minors aimed to comply with governmental requirements to get their mines legalised. However, it is also evident that their conceptualisation of minors, as previously discussed, does not stick to the legal boundary of the age of 18.

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86 Interview with secretary of ASOBAMINARMEA, Quibdó, 18 March 2018
87 Association of Barequeros in Artisanal Mining of Medio Atrato [Asociación de Barequeros en Minería Artesanal del Medio Atrato]
89 A total of 338 miners approved the internal regulations of ASOBAMINARMEA during their fifth general assembly in 2016.
In summary, the primary research findings of this study reveal that perceptions of the social roles of children and muchachos(as) are affected by the interaction with institutional values aiming to protect children. The tension between local practices and legal frameworks illustrates how difficult it is for locals to adopt age-specific discourses that identify adolescents under the umbrella of ‘minors’. Furthermore, the study empirically demonstrates how, within a constrained environment, subaltern groups deploy tactics in their everyday such as the use of the child protection language to get access to services and validate mining practices. These tactics reinterpret and challenge structures, discourses and power relations (De Certeau, 1989, p.xix). The (re)interpretation of legal frameworks regarding children by local communities emphasises the bidirectional dimension of those who produce a discourse and those who ‘consume’ it.

5.1.5 Relationship with NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs

The use of social age as a main analytical lens allows us to contextualise the experience of children and muchachos(as) within the broader and complex socio-economic and political systems they operate in (Clark-Kazak, 2009, p.1320). However, my research illustrates the need to broaden the concept of social age suggested by Clark-Kazak (2009). The presence of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs means that additional actors and relationships are at play when defining social connotation of childhood in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. By including them, it is possible to have a more accurate and comprehensive approximation of the existing relationships and actors that shape the meanings attached to the local connotation of childhood. For analytical purposes, the examination of the interchange of young people with locals is separated from those who are members of NSAGs and miners in non-legalised mining sites. This division does not mean that members of NSAGs or mining entrepreneurs are always outsiders to the communities. However, their
status as armed actors and providers of job opportunities calls for separate analysis.

So, does the presence of NSAGs and illicit economies inevitably signify the end of the childhood experience for many people in Chocó? To answer this, it is necessary to scrutinise the extent to which child labourers in mines have lost their childhood. Armed actors and the risks attached to illegal mining are conceived as “dimensions of living” (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995, p.6) that exist alongside other routines of people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas.

As discussed in Chapter Two, some mining communities experienced a ‘normalisation of the threat’ (Anderson, 1968, p.303 in Bankoff, 2001, p.31), which, in this case, is the presence of NSAGs and foreign miners. Locals incorporate this threat, not without initial resistance, in their body of knowledge and everyday practices. However, the empirical data I gathered shows that in areas controlled by guerrilla groups the level of normalisation of the threat was higher than areas under the dominance of paramilitary forces and criminal bands. This was the case due to the long-term social intervention led by guerrilla groups wherein children were a cornerstone of the means to securing community acceptance.

Therefore, NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs capitalised on the tremendous social value of small children within their communities in order to gain access and cooperation in mining areas. According to the accounts gathered during informal conversations with miners and local communities, NSAGs and owners of backhoes and dredgers have improved the facilities of these towns. Churches, benches, and football pitches have been built with the revenues made by mechanised mining, and an arranged percentage of the profits given to the
community councils
through ‘taxes’ controlled by NSAGs. Likewise, small children have received clothes, sweets, sports equipment, Christmas gifts and school supplies. These ‘donations’ made by illegal actors have had two main effects on the local connotation of childhood. One is that they have stressed the conception of children as valuable and vulnerable beings that are considered as such until they reach puberty or complete primary school. Coupled with this, the other effect is that the contributions made by NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs have paradoxically allowed children to have the childhood that the globalised normative frameworks say is the right one to have; for example, with access to primary school and playgrounds.

In Rio Quito and Bebarama, children maintain specific and sporadic relationships with members of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. In Bebarama, they did not refer to feelings of fear due to the presence of FARC-EP in their villages, indeed, its combatants were mostly regarded positively due to the football tournaments they organised, as well as the security provided. In this area, local communities perceived their territory as relatively peaceful as FARC-EP did not inflict direct violence against them. One of the primary teachers reflected that “they [FARC members] already knew the people, they did not eat their animals, and when the community needed something they bought it […], they have taken care of the community”. Moreover, in Rio Quito some locals established romantic relationships or started a family with those foreign miners and members of NSAGs. According to one of the leaders of Rio Quito:

There are cases of men, women, youths and elderly people who spend their time with them [paramilitaries]. There are even paramilitaries’ wives; they are family. There are at least ten youths at this moment in Paimadó working with paramilitaries, some are minors, and others are not.

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90 According to one of the leaders interviewed in Rio Quito, the payment ranges from 5gm-8gm of gold (03 May 2017, Rio Quito). In Bebarama, around 18% of the profits are given to the communities (ASOBAMINARMEA, 2016, p.1).

91 Charla, mixed adults and muchachos(as), Bebarama 13 February 2017 [Author’s translation].

92 Informal conversation, Victor, Rio Quito, 2 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
As in other conflict-affected areas, such family ties put some members of mining villages in a grey area and made it more difficult to protect their communities from armed actors (Boyden and Berry, 2004, p.xii). Young people in both departments were aware of the presence of NSAGs in their territories, some mentioned permanent cautions given by their parents to avoid any contact with them, but others mentioned feelings of esteem and rapport. 

Understanding these contradictory perceptions across mining areas is crucial for the analysis of decision-making and agency among young people in this context. The presence of armed groups does not always conflict with the enjoyment of childhood, and in some areas where government investment is limited or non-existent, they have actually contributed to making that enjoyment possible.

The chronic economic dependence of ASGM miners on mining entrepreneurs, as well as the familiarisation with NSAGs, has made involvement with both actors attractive to young people. As Enrique, one of the commanders of FARC-EP recalled in interview:

We must have as a precedent that many people, many young people arrived due to affection, they got familiarised and arrived because of relationships in their family nucleus, in the communities, etc. So always where my cousin is going, my friend is going as well, I am going where my friend is, etc... 

By describing the recruitment of children to FARC-EP as ‘arriving’ rather than forced conscription, Enrique regards the participation of children in those armed groups as a personal choice. For him, as for the other members of NSAGs interviewed, a 14 year-old is perfectly able to make decisions concerning his life trajectory. This perception was also shared by the local

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94 Interview, Ezequiel, Commander 34th Front FARC-EP, Quibdó, 29 April 2017 [Author’s translation].
participants in this study, as examined in the next section. Due to the proximity of armed actors, the local notion of adulthood linked to full-time work has also come to be closely related to the person’s capacity to decide to join NSAGs of his own volition.

Nonetheless, the kinship formed with NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs aggravated the security issues of various mining villages. Some locals consider that “mines are getting fucked up” due to disputes between families and threats made by paramilitaries as a way of reprisal. Children from Rio Quito and Unión Panamericana were especially reserved when talking about criminal bands and paramilitary forces in their territory. They felt uneasy naming them directly and, instead, they used expressions such as “those guys”, “those people” or “those bandits”. Due to the prosecution of this illegal economy by governmental authorities, as well as disputes between NSAGs for territorial control of this profitable business, children and their communities were surviving in the midst of armed confrontations and social control of their everyday practices. As Karen expressed during a charla:

Sometimes people believe that ‘affecting’ is when the guerrillas or the paramilitary murder a family member and it is not, it is when they disrupt one’s order [...] we cannot go out confident whenever we want [...] it has affected a lot the ‘public order’ (security conditions) and those people are brought in specifically by mining. As they know that in Rio Quito it is said that there is so much gold, they are widespread throughout all the areas of Rio Quito.96

Feelings of fear were coupled with curfews (as illustrated in Karen’s description), as well as constant harassment and intimidation of youths to join those groups. Moreover, as analysed in Chapter Six, according to officials of the Colombian Army some children have been used as human shields to protect

95 Interview, Female ASGM miner, 02 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
96 Charla, Female participant, Rio Quito, 3 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
machinery from destruction during military operations.\textsuperscript{97} Mining entrepreneurs have taken advantage of under-18 year old children to protect their machinery since these children are legally safeguarded against armed confrontations or interrogation. Consequently, muchachos(as) face the ambiguity of positioning themselves as children when they are locally constructed within the span of adulthood. This strategic use of children demonstrates how local constructions of childhood and adulthood have been tactically merged with legal definitions to take advantage of muchachos as both workers and legally vulnerable subjects. Children and young people have become labourers and victims within the business of gold mining. Thus, being a muchacho(a) has become a dangerous phase of life, especially in areas where criminal organisations and paramilitary groups are present; adolescents and youths are significantly at risk of being targeted by legal and illegal armed structures.

Thus, the abrupt change in nature of ASGM to a more predatory commercial one, externally ‘owned’ and exploited by illicit actors, has affected local communities in several ways: the income generation of families, cultural patterns, and the social division of labour where children and muchachos(as) are involved, as well as the security conditions in the mining areas. All these transformations inexorably affect the lives and the social roles of children and young people, given that “there are no wars where children do not walk” or are present (Reynolds, 2004, p.261). Since NSAGs and foreign miners arrived, cultural loss and disputes between families and communities have become accentuated. Relatives, friends and community councils have had conflicts around land ownership, financial revenues and the cultural deterioration of the social fabric.\textsuperscript{98} Pedro, one of the leaders interviewed in Unión Panamericana, highlighted this:

\textsuperscript{97} Interview, Militaries from the Colombian Joint Task Force Titan, Quibdó, 12 December 2016.\textsuperscript{98} Interview, Representative of the community council from Alto Atrato COCOMOPOCA, Quibdó, 12 May 2017.
Twenty or thirty years ago, this damn mechanised mining came poisoned with an underground and unsustainable economy. It harms us socially, environmentally and economically. This type of mining destroys our social fabric, the family, the coherence we have as an ethnic group.\textsuperscript{99}

These observations were echoed during the research activities with muchachos(as) and children. Most of the participants do not know any traditional or cultural practices from their ethnic group, and some refused to be considered as Afro-descendants, saying with a pejorative overtone “we are not Africans”.\textsuperscript{100}

In summary, the empirical data gathered indicates that children and muchachos(as) in mining-and-conflict-affected areas navigate localised and complex relationships that are differently shaped by violence and armed actors. The primary data also clearly illustrates that family bonds, relations of esteem and rapport with armed actors and mining entrepreneurs, as well as mobility restrictions and armed violence frame social expectations and constructions of childhood in the research areas. Drawing on Feldman (1991 in Nordstrom and Robben, 1995, p.4), it is argued here that the violence attached to the illegal extraction of gold, as well as the mechanisation of mining, have been dynamic forces that shape “across space and time” the perceptions of childhood, as well as identities of ASGM communities and young people.

The detailed analysis of the social connotations of childhood within mining-and-conflict-affected areas demonstrates the pertinence and need to supplement chronological age and cognitive development assumptions of childhood. Taking into account the comprehension of those specific processes that moulded childhood discussed in the first part of the chapter, the following section aims to convey the motivations and ways children and muchachos

\textsuperscript{99} Interview, Unión Panamericana, 26 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
\textsuperscript{100} Imaginative session, mixed children, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
make choices within those contexts where armed conflict and illegal economies are entangled.

5.2 The capacity of choice, agency, and reasons for engagement

Examining the reasoning behind the involvement of children and adolescents in NSAGs and illicit activities is not an easy task to undertake for two main reasons. Firstly, as has been the case in other conflict-affected areas (see Reynolds, 2004, p.264), the socio-economic stability and protection of children were at risk prior to the control exerted over gold mining by NSAGs and illegal actors. Many youngsters already had to rely on their personal resources and networks, and, in many cases, families and older adults depended on their younger members’ ability to work. Poverty aside, before the onset of armed conflict, young people and children joined gold mining as part of their ancestral practices. Mining was one income-generating activity within a range of possibilities that are now almost non-existent, including agriculture and fishing. Therefore, the analysis of children’s agency during armed conflict should take into account the shift in conditions and how decision-making was curtailed or manoeuvred by these new external actors.

Secondly, as was discussed in Chapter Two, globalised conceptions of what a desirable childhood entails inhibit many from envisaging children that voluntarily decide to join NSAGs or participate in labour activities labelled as exploitative or illicit. Consequently, children’s decisions are usually invalidated by claiming that children lack full understanding and independence. In conflict-affected contexts, it is generally assumed that the cruelty and violence perpetrated by NSAGs, as well as socioeconomic deprivation, are “binding contingencies” that discredit children choices (Bodineau, 2014. p117). Even though recent academic studies have shown that children’s agency is manifest in regard to armed actors, migration, sex and drug trafficking (see Dowdney,
2003; Honwana, 2005; Rosen, 2005; Drumbl, 2010; Hashim and Thorse, 2011; Hemming, 2011, p.23; Bodineau, 2014), the more abstract issue of conceptualising agency where extractive economies and armed conflict converge has not been addressed. Although it cannot be denied that the protracted conflict in Colombia, along with the environmental effects of mining, have made local communities in mining villages extremely vulnerable, younger generations have developed strategies for coping and survival. This study demonstrates that children and young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas have a say in decisions and their capacity to make choices is socially framed. These abilities have not developed in isolation.

This section examines explanations and accounts given to support muchachos(as) and children’s decisions to work and get involved with NSAGs. The analysis draws on the analytical insights gained from the examination of strategies, tactics and trajectories in the everyday practices of ‘consumers’, as suggested by De Certeau (1984) and the subsequent theoretical refinement made by Honwana (2005). Honwana (2005, p.49) proposed the concept of tactical agency to approach decisions made by child combatants in Mozambique. As outlined in Chapter Two, this concept refers to the short-term and specific actions that dominated or subaltern groups can exert within the social structure in which they are immersed. Tactical agency is significantly different to the concept of ‘strategic agency’ where dominant actors can compete against others and use the agencies of the weak (Utas, 2005, p.407). Meanwhile, tactical agency depends on specific opportunities and the ability of the ‘weak’ to intervene in events to create opportunities (Honwana, 2005, p.49). For the specific case of this research, tactical agency refers to the actions made by children and young people to create opportunities and maximise the conditions of the mining-and-conflict-affected areas where they operate.
Muchachos(as) and children are ‘tactical agents’ that create opportunities amid the difficulties brought by the mechanisation of mining and the arrival of NSAGs. In particular, semi- and fully mechanised mining reduced the unskilled workforce needed, made gold scarce in superficial alluvial gravels, and created an environment where security was compromised. Coupled with physical strength and willingness to work under difficult conditions, tactical agency in the form of manifesting solidarity, social networks and friendships became essential to engage in the extraction of gold. To be hired, a muchacho needs to know or be related to a mining entrepreneur, or to get a recommendation from a miner, while, in some cases, he may ask to get permission from NSAGs who manage and provide security for dredgers and mining sites. Likewise, tactics are also deployed by muchachos in ASGM near backhoes. Fifteen year-old Miguel mentioned that, during days allocated to bareque (when local miners try to find leftovers of gold left behind by backhoes), he and some peers negotiate with the guards of the mine to get access. If access is denied, he is sometimes able to find work in ancillary roles. The experiences of Miguel and those who join semi-and fully mechanised mining demonstrate how creative and tactical muchachos and young miners have to be, as well as the alliances, and networking skills they have to develop in order to get into the jobs available in this economy. As Boyden and Berry (2004, p. xvii) claim, “war does not inevitably destroy all that it touches, and that while war causes many to become extremely vulnerable, vulnerability does not in itself preclude ability”.

A form of tactical agency is also reflected in the shifting identities and labels used by muchachos(as) and children to refer to the practices of mining. Depending who the interlocutor is they avoid referring to their work practices

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101 Charla, Male participant, Rio Quito, 09 May 2017.
102 Informal conversation, Miner in mechanised mine, 9 December 2016, Unión Panamericana.
103 Imaginative session, mixed children, Bebarama, 08 Febrero 2017.
as ‘mechanised’ or ‘illegal’. They always present themselves as barequeros (traditional miners). They are conscious of the negative connotations attached to workers of semi-and mechanised illegal mining labelled as miners, retreros\textsuperscript{104} or dragueros\textsuperscript{105}. As illegal ore extraction is heavily stigmatised and prosecuted by national governmental authorities, referring to themselves as barequeros or members of a community council is a tactic employed in order to avoid being prosecuted or stigmatised. In many cases, it was hard to determine what kind of mining muchachos did as they referred to mining in general and initially refused to provide a detailed account of their work. After building confidence and getting familiar with their jargon, it was possible to determine their navigation between various tasks and types of mining and roles, as analysed in depth in Chapter Six. Just like adults who tactically use child protection language to get access to services, as examined in Section 5.1.4, young people are also aware of the political efficacy of language and shifting identities to navigate through the confinements of the constrained environment in which they are embedded.

Children are active agents that operate in complex social and political circumstances where various forms of child labour are combined. Within the set of possibilities available to them in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, some muchachos and children decided to transit permanently from miners to combatants. Even though not all children make this life choice, it exemplifies how some of them act and how they tactically make decisions within the range of options available. Jean Carlos started doing ASGM at an early age alongside his parents and his other ten siblings.\textsuperscript{106} For them, the presence of FARC-EP in their communities and mining sites was part of their daily life. Locals were frequently summoned in Bebarama for ideological meetings as well as talks

\textsuperscript{104} Miners that use backhoes.
\textsuperscript{105} Miners that use dredgers.
\textsuperscript{106} Interview, Transitional Local Zone for Demobilisation of FARC-EP, Vidri, 15 May 2017
regarding regulation of mining. Jean Carlos said he and his 17 year-old cousin were tired of seeing abuses committed by the government against peasants and miners, as well as the lack of opportunities in their territory. He repeatedly claimed that it was he who looked for FARC-EP when he was 14, and requested to be recruited, and so he and his cousin joined the group. He was the only one of his ten siblings to do so. He said that he and his cousin were not cajoled or forced in the way that the government and media seek to portray youth inside FARC-EP. They joined the NSAG voluntarily as they shared its political views and ideology. For him, it was not an easy decision, but it was his decision:

To make a decision at 14 years to enter an organisation like FARC-EP is very hard. Firstly, because it is tough to leave your mother and the rest of your siblings, father, uncles, nephews because one has always lived with them. It is very hard to make the decision! But one takes a step back to think, analyse things and make decisions.107

The decision of Jean Carlos and his cousin should not be seen as an isolated case where individual choices were made. This case provides evidence of the social nature of agency where children make tactical alliances and decisions that are informed and validated by their contexts and sets of values. Jean Carlos’ agency does not deny his status as a victim of various forms of child labour, but it clearly shows that he “became more than just a victim” (Honwana, 2005, p.48). As Drumbl (2010, p.223) argues with regard to children who decide to join rebel groups “it may not be a fair decision, and it certainly is not one undertaken in a situation of untrammeled free-will, but it is some kind of decision nonetheless.” The experience of Jean Carlos as a miner and later as a combatant shows the different states of being and ways of navigating between various roles in the service of NSAGs.

107 Interview, Member of FARC-EP, Transitional Local Zone for Demobilisation of FARC-EP, Vidri, 15 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
The concept of tactical agency challenges the simplified association of child labour in mines with poverty as the primary driver. Despite prevalent poverty, child labour in mines is not a widespread practice. Although lack of alternative employment opportunities and money were mentioned, not all poor children from mining zones are involved in mining or associated with activities controlled by NSAGs or their extortion practices. Agency comes in different shapes, and differs from context to context and child to child (Gleason, 2016, p.457). It is used in both scenarios, enabling locals to accept or reject options from among a set of alternatives (Bourdillon, 2006, p.1207). Some accounts referred to good values and honesty as the reasons for rejection of the involvement in illicit activities. During a charla, Karen explained that in Rio Quito, despite the harassment of paramilitaries, “youths from here have been instilled to work, to get ahead by their own means in a dignified manner, not through that violence”. Likewise, during an imaginative session, some boys asserted that they do not receive money from NSAGs or miners. One of them was especially emphatic, claiming that “there is no reason why I should run errands for them!”.

As suggested by various academic studies (Zelizer, 1985, p.63; Dowdney, 2003, p.150; Maconachie and Hilson, 2016, p.139), blaming poverty and difficult socioeconomic conditions as the only motive for the involvement of young people in mining or illicit economies overlooks the role of moral tenets and ideas that also inform their decision-making. These values and ideas are essential elements that help children to make sense of the context they live in, and to act accordingly (Reynolds, 2004, p.264).

Muchachos(as) and children are aware of the constraints present in the settings they live in and the limitations these pose regarding getting formal jobs. My primary findings, therefore, challenge academic assumptions that conceive

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109 Charla, adults, Rio Quito, 03 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
110 Imaginative session, mixed children, Bebarama, 27 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
111 Interview, Muchacha, Unión Panamericana, 18 January 2017.
children as naïve agents unable to assess the risk attached to mining or participation in roles under the control of NSAGs (i.e. Omer and Reyes-Lugardo, 2011, p.353; Happold, 2005, p.10). Indeed, all the muchachos(as) and children who took part in this study stated that, due to their proximity to mining, they were aware of the numerous risks. These included landslides and being buried, high temperatures inside dragon dredgers, mercury poisoning and physical exhaustion, as well as possible armed confrontations between NSAGs and military forces. However, if muchachos(as) and children are aware of the risks of mining in conflict-affected areas, it is necessary to examine why some of them continue to be involved in these activities beyond economic necessity, what they are seeking to achieve, and whether it is choice or coercion.

As suggested in similar studies conducted in socio-economic deprived areas affected by armed conflicts or delinquency (see Dowdney, 2003; Utas, 2005, p.421; Winton, 2005; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; p.105), the findings of this research reaffirm that school completion does not necessarily provide upward social mobility. Rather, peers and older generations see lavish spending on technology, imported clothes, motorcycles, and jewellery as a sign of prestige, power, emancipation, and success in life. This is the case, mainly because most of those commodities are not available in Chocó, so people have to travel to main cities like Bogota or Medellin, or even neighbouring countries such as Panama to buy them. The participation of children in illicit economies offers a tempting and effective way of achieving their consumer objectives and social status with no requirement for qualifications beyond physical strength.

This desire for luxury items means that children make tactical decisions based on their understanding of the limitations associated with staying in school. Diego, a 37 year-old mining entrepreneur from Bebarama started working in ASGM at the age of ten when he dropped out of school as it was not needed for
mining. He claimed that due to his constant effort as a miner he was able to get where he is now. Diego is one of the main owners of machinery and illegal mining sites in the region. He was wearing a COP$14,000,000 (£3,500) gold chain when I met him. After small talk, he started telling me dozens of stories about him dealing with NSAGs and extortionists. For him, dealing with armed groups is part of the landscape and occupational hazards of being a mining entrepreneur. For Diego, the risk of illegal mining is worth it: “the mine has changed me, it has given me a lot of happiness, it has changed me a lot, and it has made me eat well”. This illustrates how social validation between peers and external members of mining communities are mediated by appearance and the capacity to display economic power through ostentatious expenditure.

Being socially recognised through conspicuous consumption is seen by many muchachos(as) and children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas as “sufficiently important to risk their lives or kill for” (Dowdney, 2003, p.121). However, although young people show agency and some adult traits such as ambition and economic power, they are victimised by the system in which they are embedded to the extent that they will put their lives at risk, if necessary. As Wells (2014) argues, subjectivity has a double connotation. It refers both to socially exist as a subject, which is the prerequisite of agency, and to being subjected or shaped by socio-cultural forces and practices that “limit the extent of our personhood, often in oppressive ways” (p.263). Therefore, the quest for social validation, as well as the achievement of better living conditions, could partly explain why some muchachos decide to join gold mining and other forms of labour as agents even if it implies being subjected to the control of NSAGs.

112 Informal conversation, Bebarama, 8 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
One of the main aspects to take into account is that child labour in gold mines is not regarded by communities and children as exploitative. As highlighted in Chapter Two, in Spanish, the native language of the researched areas (as well as in French or Portuguese), there is no differentiation between ‘work’ and ‘labour’ as is the case in English. ‘Trabajo’ is the word used to refer both to economically reattributed activities and to those that mainly imply physical effort but are not necessarily paid (André, 2014, p.191; Bhukuth, 2008, p.387). Appellatives are especially important as child labour (trabajo infantil) does not necessarily have negative implications nor is it equated with exploitation or the loss of childhood. This is the case even when children participate in gold mining. As analysed in depth in Chapter Six, alluvial mining is a learning-by-doing activity that children initially do alongside their parents when accompanying them to mining sites. Therefore, the unpaid support of children in mining is understood as collaboration not as labour. As one ASGM miner explained during a charla: “traditionally children accompany their parents to all activities [in mines], but this does not necessarily mean that they are fulfilling a work obligation, but they always accompany them so that they learn”.

Social validation of child labour in mines in local communities is another vital element that informs children’s agency capacity. Prior to the arrival of NSAGs and foreigners in Chocó, ASGM was considered an economic practice that also allowed adults to provide vocational training to children, teach them how to become responsible, keep them away from vices and bad practices, or sanction them when they were reckless and misbehaved at school. Although ASGM is becoming replaced by semi-and fully mechanised mining, and local communities have become familiar with normative frameworks that prohibit

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113 Charla, Male adult, Union Panamericana, 19 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
114 Charla, Unión Panamericana, 20 November 2016.
children working in mines, as mentioned earlier, the social validation of this practice continues in the researched areas.

For all the muchachos(as) and adults who participated in this study, those who decided to join NSAGs claimed that they were doing so because they like that option and feel attracted to it. On no occasion was the use of physical violence or threats mentioned as a recruitment method. It was common to hear explanations regarding muchachos(as)' decisions such as: “The person who left for the armed groups went because he wanted to go”\textsuperscript{116}; “The person who wanted that life, well, got into those groups”\textsuperscript{117}; or “here FARC-EP established that joining the guerrillas was voluntary. If one wanted to join FARC, they would get in, and if they did not like it, it was their decision, it was not obligatory. It was each person’s decision”.\textsuperscript{118} Similarly, while none mentioned being forced to work in gold mining, aside from through poverty, various participants mentioned enjoyment like Raul: “we like mining by choice because if we did not like it, we would not do it”.\textsuperscript{119} Moreover, muchachos(as) and children expressed admiration for traditional mining, and some asserted feeling unique and proud for doing it.\textsuperscript{120} These ideas are closely related to the value of economic independence, social status and validation achieved through work, conspicuous consumption, and economic power, as examined above and in Section 5.1.3.

The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Dessy and Pallage (2005) in their analysis of the economic impact of banning hazardous forms of child labour. Their study also found that insecurity and poor working conditions, as well as physical and emotional distress, are not enough to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} Charla, Male adult, Bebarama, 13 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
\item \textsuperscript{117} Charla, Female adult, Bebarama, 13 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
\item \textsuperscript{118} Charla, Male adult, Bebarama, 24 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
\item \textsuperscript{119} Charla, Male adult, Rio Quito, 9 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
\item \textsuperscript{120} Interview, Child miner, Unión Panamericana, 29 January 2017.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
establish that “the worst forms of child labour reflect victimisation, rather than choice – at least on the part of the parents” (p.70). Similarly, Grootaert and Kanbur (1995, p.188) claim that, in order to design effective policies to tackle child labour, it is essential to understand the features of the work, as well as the relationship between children and the provider of work. This will help to determine to what extent the arrangement between them should be considered exploitative. As demonstrated in Section 5.1, children and young people develop kin relationships and friendships with mining entrepreneurs and even with members of NSAGs that control and extort money from gold miners.

Relationships and rapport with these ‘employers’, as well as mutual feelings of esteem, suggest that the involvement in mining and related roles is not necessarily exploitative.

Furthermore, muchachos(as) and children have a general sense that they can participate in mining and related labour activities whenever they want and for the number of hours they decide. For instance, in Bebarama, mining entrepreneurs alongside ASGM’s leaders establish specific days when locals can work near the backhoes. In Rio Quito, locals negotiate with dredgers’ managers the time and days where they can wash rugs or carry out mining operations near the machinery. In Unión Panamericana, miners work independently, and they are the ones who decide when to work. This flexibility and the opportunities of negotiation give locals the sense that, despite the presence and extortions of NSAGs, they remain independent and, whether adult, muchacho or child, they are not exploited.

The relationships forged between local communities and NSAGs comprise a central variable in the cultural and symbolic environment where muchachos like Jean Carlos live, develop moral values, and operate accordingly. This environment helps to explain why some young people get involved in child
labour activities including those under the control of NSAGs, and why those decisions are rendered as voluntary by their peers and adults.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter discussed the construction of childhood, exploitation, and agency in relation to representing the experience of muchachos(as) and children involved in extractive economies controlled and exploited by NSAGs. It identified the limitations of the international conventions defining childhood based on the chronological age of eighteen, as well as the false antithesis upheld between childhood, work and violence. The analysis of the experiences of childhood according to the social age of children demonstrates that work and violence are part of their socialisation. Thus, child labourers are badly miscast as those with a lost childhood. Here, childhood is understood as an open-ended process that comes in different shapes, and it is informed by social meanings ascribed to physical development, decision-making, and relationships with peers and adults. In the analysis of this process, the inclusion of children’s perspectives is imperative.

Through the discussion of the roles performed by muchachos(as) and children within their families and communities, the chapter calls for the conceptualisation of childhood as a fluid concept which is socially constructed. In this construction, there is room for playing, schooling, working and interacting with NSAGs. Moreover, in contexts where families and parenting are not reduced to conjugal families, constant negotiations and interdependence between adults and children are necessary for the functioning of their household and the community as a whole. These findings challenge assumptions of constant child dependency. In mining-and-conflict-affected areas, children are constructed as active, independent and supportive beings. Their progression to adulthood is determined by their social roles, as well as
their decision-making in regard to pregnancies, leaving their homes, finding a partner, dropping out of school, or permanently joining different types of child labour.

Furthermore, the decision-making process of muchachos(as) should not be conceived in isolation from the contexts in which they live, given that symbols, cultural and moral tenets, as well as the interaction with NGOs and NSAGs, inform their decisions and help them to make sense of these contexts. The empirical data I gathered during the fieldwork indicates that migratory processes, the industrialisation of ASGM, and interaction with outsiders including NSAGs and NGOs carve the meanings ascribed to children and their roles. Moreover, the relationship between mining-and-conflict-affected communities and institutional discourses is bidirectional. The analysis of the tactical use of such concepts as chronological age and the age of majority by local communities reveals how this categories adapted to social realities, and in some cases are tailored and included in local narratives in order get access to services or even legalise mining sites. The ability of people in mining communities to manipulate policy language, interpret the guidelines of governmental programmes, and also interpret ideas about child protection to suit their economic needs demonstrates a level of a collective agency where they are making the best out of a bad situation and even turning it to their advantage.

The symbolic and cultural environments where muchachos(as) and children live and act are featured by conspicuous consumption in the midst of poverty, the correlation between power and violence, and the availability of cash for short periods of time, as well as the social prestige of wealthy miners. In this symbolic environment, NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs have taken advantage of the representation of children as valuable in the early stages of life
to get acceptance from local communities and to protect their machinery from military attacks. The provision of gifts, sports events and infrastructure has led to the involvement of young people with those actors becoming a normalised and accepted situation. Likewise, this is an example of how, paradoxically, illegal actors have enabled children to enjoy so called ‘childlike activities’ while also exercising control over mining communities.

Although the participants in the field did not use specific references to ‘vulnerability’, there is a clear perception of the dangerous situations and activities that negatively affect muchachos(as) and children. Young people are aware of the hazards of gold mining and the actions of NSAGs, as well as those inside their communities, such as domestic violence. Nonetheless, the analysis of the rationale behind their involvement in different types of child labour helps to demonstrate that beyond economic needs, other factors such as feelings of pride, political ideology, prestige, and low-entry requirements play vital roles in their decisions. Furthermore, due to local practices, social endorsement, and the possibility of negotiation and decision-making in establishing workdays, as well as combining labour with schooling, child labour in mines is not considered exploitative.

My primary research data shows that muchachos(as) transit between different types of child labour displaying strategic alliances, networking and negotiation skills. Agency is a social ability framed in a context where NSAGs and mining are in constant interaction. Young people seize opportunities present in their environment to improve their situation or to avoid being engaged in illicit economies. This study therefore extends our knowledge about agency capacity and shifting identities that young people experiment with when embedded in settings where various hazardous forms of labour are entangled. Furthermore, it adds an inter-relational perspective that identifies the multiple positions of
children and young people within a complex web of interactions during wartime, which constitutes a new element in the debate about child labour. This web of relationships is intersected by power relations, the sexual division of labour and institutional discourses around children. If developing programming aimed at tackling the worst forms of child labour takes these elements into account, this will increase the possibilities of attuning institutional interventions to local realities and children’s needs.

In conclusion, despite the evident constraints present in the lives of muchachos(as) and children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas, they are active agents and co-producers of representations and realities. They act within the limited possibilities available in their environment to cope and survive. Therefore, the definitions of vulnerability and exploitation cannot be taken for granted as traits that are inherently equal in the childhoods of those who grow up in conflict-affected areas. Drawing on the discussion on childhood and agency presented in this chapter, the next chapter moves on to discuss how actual roles performed by children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas challenge current understandings of the worst forms of child labour.
 CHAPTER 6

How do working children navigate in mining- and-conflict-affected contexts?

Adjustment and transformation of social trajectories of children

Introduction

For organisations and development programming aimed at devising appropriate interventions for children and young people involved in hazardous forms of labour in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, it is not only necessary to understand the social constructions of childhood and agency. It is also imperative to understand the exact nature of the roles they perform in unlicensed mining controlled by NSAGs in conflict. However, scholars and intervention agencies tend to have a very narrow understanding of child miners, who are presented as impoverished subjects who only take part in ASGM alongside their families and then mainly for economic reasons (see ILO, 2006; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008, p.13; Lieten, 2011; André and Godin, 2014). Little is known about the transformation in the trajectories followed by this group of working children during natural resource conflicts. As discussed in Chapter Two, a growing body of scholars has examined the relationships and dynamics between mineral resources and armed conflicts (Keen, 1998; Collier and Hoefflert, 2004; Ross, 2004; Arnson and Zartman, 2005; Le Billon, 2009; Rustad and Binningsbø, 2012). Nevertheless, the alterations in traditional forms of child labour and the coping mechanisms children use in areas where various forms of hazardous work, illicit actors and NSAGs are entangled, remain underexplored.
Furthermore, the remarkable academic and institutional attention given to children who perform only armed roles in wartime (see Dallaire, 2011; Singer, 2001; Singer, 2006; Andving and Gate, 2010; UN, 2015), has overshadowed the study of other forms of hazardous work during armed conflicts. As highlighted in Chapter Two, there is an oversimplification of child labour in mines especially when it takes place during natural resource conflicts. Although some scholars and intervention agencies have acknowledged the use of children as combatants and as miners during resource-fuelled conflicts (Rosen, 2005, p.70; Omer and Reyes-Lubango, 2011, p.335; ILO, 2006, p.5), those children are typically rendered as separate subjects (child combatants or child miners) and the intersection or transition between their trajectories is not clear. Moreover, scant attention has been given to the study of non-military roles performed by children in the service of NSAGs during wartime and the combination of various forms of child labour around extractive economies.

In this chapter, I examine how working children adjust when various forms of hazardous work are combined during armed conflict. In order to answer this research question and to bridge the identified academic gaps, the first section directs attention towards analysing the transformation in the social division of labour following the arrival of mining entrepreneurs and NSAGs. Moreover, this section examines the actual working functions performed by children and muchachos(as) at mining sites. This shows that child labour in mining-and-conflict-affected areas has exceeded the family sphere of operation of children and that ASGM is not the only type of extraction method in which children work. They are also involved in semi- and fully industrialised forms of unlicensed gold exploitation in the service of NSAGs and illicit actors.

In the second section, I analyse the relational dimension of hazardous forms of work beyond the link between the exploiters and the exploited. I particularly examine how working children from mining areas endure the presence and
control exerted by NSAGs and the industrialisation of mining. Unlike existing literature, this part of the chapter shows that child labour in mines is not static, especially so during wartime. Working children are flexible subjects who adapt and negotiate their participation in hazardous forms of work. The presence of armed actors and the illegality of this economy have changed the nature of child labour. Therefore, children were found to be transiting between unarmed and armed roles in their quest for survival. Consequently, in many cases, the borderline between the work of child miners and child combatants is imprecise.

Drawing on the discussion on social constructions of age and ‘tactical agency’ (Honwana, 2005) examined in Chapter Five, the conceptualisation of ‘social navigation’ (Vigh, 2006) and ‘seascapes’ (Vigh, 2009), explained in Chapter Two, assist the analysis in this chapter. The arguments developed in the current chapter shed light on the courses followed by young people in the constrained spaces of action in which they live. Moreover, it exposes the narrow understandings of theorising in these settings which does not reflect the complex reality of working children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. The examination made in this chapter also helps to scrutinise, in Chapter Seven, how children involved in the ‘worst forms of child labour’ are rendered and neglected by institutions and policymakers.

6.1 Child labour within the ‘seascape’ of mining-and-conflict-affected areas

Academic literature has traditionally correlated children’s roles in ASGM with ‘women’s work’ in mining contexts such as domestic chores and supporting functions such as washing gravel, preparing food, or breaking stones (ILO, 2001, p.23; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008, p.14; André and Godin, 2014, p.171; Plotter, 2016, p.1016). Hilson (2010, p.450) and Plotter (2016, p.1016) argue that the
participation of children in ASGM does not necessarily imply a significant modification in cultural values in comparison with farming communities when it comes to the importance of children’s work in the social division of labour. Although physically demanding and dangerous when chemicals like mercury are used, children’s work is presented in the literature as analogous to risky roles performed in agriculture.

Nonetheless, empirical data from my study illustrates how during wartime the terrains of action where working children and muchachos(as) operate are not static, nor are they confined to the realm of ASGM or equally risky as agricultural activities. The traditional working functions of child miners in the areas where I conducted field research were no longer reduced to functions similar to ‘women’s roles’. As examined in Chapter Three, the increase in the international prices of gold in the mid-2000s drove the progressive substitution and mechanisation of ASGM, as well as the control and extortion of money exerted on mining sites by NSAGs. Therefore, the working functions of children and young people were altered. This is a clear example of how “economic flows, war and politics” as global structures frame local constructions of childhood (Wells, 2009, p.3).

Determining to what extents hazardous child labour is affected, created or modified during wartime is imperative to understand the experience of working children in those contexts and provide accurate institutional responses. Roshani (2013, p.64) claims that despite the economic impoverishment that war generates, “it cannot be assumed that it creates child labour”. For Roshani (2013), who focused her research on children involved in roles under the control of various armed actors in Medellin and Cali in Colombia, what is critical is the increase of exploitative and hazardous forms of child labour throughout a conflict. During wartime, the nature of child labour shifts to its more hazardous
forms. However, if wars do not create child labour, one should wonder how the various types of child labour that were already in place in mining areas, and were already considered by legal frameworks as exploitative and harmful, change or adapt to resource-fuelled conflicts.

The conceptualisation of social navigation proposed by Vigh (2006), and the concept of seascapes within this theoretical approximation (Vigh, 2009), help to frame the analysis of the transformation of hazardous forms of labour during conflict. Likewise, these concepts facilitate the examination, in Section 6.2, of the multiple courses of actions followed by children and muchachos(as) within the rules and terrains defined by the encounter of armed groups, criminal actors, and mining communities. As discussed in Chapter Two, social navigation is an umbrella concept that draws on the ideas of ‘tactics’ and ‘strategies’ proposed by De Certau (1984) as well as the idea of ‘life chances’ of Dahrendorf (1979).

As introduced in Chapter Two, navigation in this theoretical approach is used as a metaphor that compares human action with sailing. Sailing unlike walking refers to the movement within a fluid and shifting environment. It implies “motion within motion” (Vigh, 2009, p.420) and as such is relevant to those murky socio-political environments where one moves or sails. Referring to mining-and-conflict-affected areas as seascapes allows accounting for the “plasticity, multidimensionality and density” (Vigh, 2009, p.429) of those environments where the social practice of working children and mining communities takes place.

As Vigh (2009, p.430) suggests, social navigation occurs in relation to a set of social forces, and it varies depending on the velocity and unpredictability of the change and the level of protection or exposure that individuals have according to their positionality. Based on empirical data and observation, in this section, I
examine the rapid transformations suffered in the working conditions in mining villages and the social position of children. To do so, I compare the social division of labour in ASGM, semi- and fully mechanised gold mining (medium scale) before and during the control exerted by NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites. The analysis of these transformations helps to explain the social forces within which children navigate, as well as the processes of adaptation, which I discuss in Section 6.2, where armed and unarmed roles intersect.

Prior to discussing my primary research findings, it is vital to make two clarifications. Firstly, not all the muchachos(as) and children from mining zones are involved in mining activities, nor are they all associated with activities controlled or extorted by NSAGs. As discussed in Chapter Five, children and muchachos(as) from mining areas cannot be treated as a homogenous group and many have decided to reject their involvement in mining, NSAGs, or both. Therefore, this chapter pays particular attention to those children and muchachos(as) who are involved as workers in mines and other roles in areas under the control of NSAGs. Secondly, it is not possible to pinpoint an exact time when working roles changed. The transition towards mechanised forms of extraction in each researched area was different and progressive. However, it is possible to identify the changes that have taken place in the nature and frequency of the tasks performed by young people due to the influx of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs.

For analytical purposes, the illustration of the roles performed by muchachos(as) and children is presented in tabular form according to the type of mining in which they are involved. As explained in Chapter Three, mining communities do not refer to gold extraction in terms of legal or illegal mining. Instead, they paid particular attention to the type of technology used at mine
sites. Therefore, to reflect the roles and experiences of children and young people as closely to the original accounts as possible, the analysis is carried out by focusing separately on ASGM, semi-mechanised and fully mechanised mining. This division does not deny the ‘messiness’ and fluidity of the seascapes of mining-and–conflict-affected areas. In fact, this disorder is a central element in understanding how children survive and advance amid resource-fuelled conflicts.

### 6.1.1 Working children in ASGM and semi-mechanised mining

In the context of traditional ASGM performed by Afro-Colombian communities since the 16th century, it is common that children and muchachos(as) actively participate in the mining process alongside adults in tasks according to their physical strength. This form of mining is a physically demanding activity that is typically performed between various family-units alongside rivers. It relies on the use of rustic hand-held tools to find gold in shallow alluvial gravel in order to provide families with subsistence-level income (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.21). As Table 2 illustrates, before NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs arrived at mining areas, small children were in charge of transporting food and supplies or babysitting younger siblings in mining sites or at home. Depending on the ore location, the techniques used (locally referred as *mazamorreo or bareque,* *zambullidero,* *agua corrida,* *hoyadero* or *guaches*), and the stamina of the children or muchachos(as), they also worked washing alluvial gravels, breaking stones.

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121 Mazamorreo is a mining technique mainly performed by women during the dry season using rudimentary tools. The ore is extracted from gravel banks of rivers. Zambullidero is a mining technique carried out mainly by women when river flows are low. Miners attach a heavy stone on their backs to help them diving and collect gravel. The ore is extracted using rudimentary tools. Agua Corrida is a mining technique that implies the construction of inclined ditches through which water with gold runs. Ore is trapped using filters and nets. Hoyadero is a mining technique used when ore deposits are located in deep soil layers. It is mainly performed by men and implies the excavation of 15-meter deep pits. Guaches is a technique that also implies the excavation of 15-meter deep pits and additional tunnels in areas where miners calculate they could find ore deposits. Guaches is the most used technique in Unión Panamericana and implies the participation of between 18 to 25 female and male miners (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.26).
with shovels, hoes, axes (Sarmiento et al., 2013, p.55), panning with bateas,\textsuperscript{122} or even petty trading.

\textsuperscript{122} See Note 39, Section 3.3.
Table 2. Roles performed by children and muchachos(as) in ASGM before and during the control of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASGM</th>
<th>BEFORE</th>
<th></th>
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<th>DURING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Muchachos</td>
<td>Muchachas</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Muchachos</td>
<td>Muchachas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Land clearing</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excavation of small pits</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport of food</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport of tools</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babysitting in mine sites</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraction and transformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of rustic tools: shovels, hoes, axes or pans</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing alluvial gravels</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breaking stones</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diving</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Being present at meetings with NSAGs</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present at meetings with mining entrepreneurs</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty trading</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Roles performed with high frequency ✔ Roles performed with low frequency ✔

(The author, 2019)
However, since the late 1990s, when mechanised systems of exploitation were introduced, and foreign actors and NSAGs arrived, these traditional practices and the involvement of children started to be adjusted and modified. As a traditional practice, ASGM was severely affected when outsiders and NSAGs started to use extortion and control gold mining production. As various studies and government reports have shown (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2012; Echavarria, 2014; Tubb, 2015; Moya, 2016), the introduction of the intensive and indiscriminate use of mechanised methods of gold extraction on a ‘first come, first served basis’, destroyed most traditional mining sites. Lucero, a 56 year-old ASGM miner, claims how practising panning got more difficult: “the places where we used to work do not have gold anymore. In Rio Quito, the dredgers and the backhoes destroyed the riversides”.\(^{123}\) Echoing Lucero, one of the leaders of a community council mentioned during an interview that: “people abandoned both traditional mining jobs and agriculture. Mining was a seasonal activity, but people stopped mining in a traditional way due to the entry of dredgers”.\(^{124}\) The destruction of traditional mining sites, coupled with the abandonment of agriculture, impacted the socio-economic situation of local communities, the cultural construction of mines as places of meeting and socialisation, and the conditions under which children and young people worked.

Although most of the roles performed in ASGM remained relatively the same after the arrival of armed actors and mining entrepreneurs, some of the working functions performed by children reduced in frequency or disappeared. Moreover, semi-mechanised forms of exploitation became merged with ASGM methods. As Table 2 shows, diving was no longer feasible; this was due to the impossibility of finding gold on the surface of rivers and, also, due to mercury

\(^{123}\) Interview, Rio Quito, 3 May 2017.
\(^{124}\) Interview, representative community council COCOMOPOCA, Quibdó, 12 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
and cyanide contamination of watercourses. Babysitting of young siblings became a practice mainly performed at home and only occasionally on mining sites. In a few villages, governmental day-care nurseries were opened for children under five. Although it is still common that children and muchachos(as) help to transport tools, food, clearing paths and mining areas with machetes, or even helping in the excavation of small pits, most ASGM miners are no longer able to extract gold by hand in nearby areas.

Even though machismo, gender violence and inequality have been present between men and women in Afro-Colombian communities since the Spanish colonisation (Meneses Copete, 2014), locals perceive the participation of girls and women in traditional ASGM as relatively equal in number and nature. Looking at Table 2, it is apparent that although girls and muchachas are especially in charge of babysitting in mining sites, they also perform the same roles in the extraction cycle as boys and muchachos. Thirteen years-old Julian explained to me, during an interview, how boys and girls are perceived as co-workers in ASGM: “men work with various women. When men break stones, they [women] help them to wash the gravel, and then they shift positions”. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that identify children’s roles in mining as those performed at the family level and closely related with household and parenting tasks according to their social, political and economic needs (ILO, 2001, p.23; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008, p.14; André and Godin, 2014, p.171).

Bearing in mind the difficulties in measuring how exploitative and dangerous forms of labour come about during wartime (Reynolds, 2004, p.264), this study found that working functions of children and muchachos(as) in mining-and-conflict-affected areas are no longer confined to the realm of ASGM. The

125 Interview, Unión Panamericana, 28 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
industrialisation of mining and the involvement of foreigners and NSAGs changed the power relationships around mining sites. In particular, ASGM has been rapidly downscaled due to this wave of mechanisation. Although community councils are the legal collective owners of land in Chocó and entitled to exercise governance over their territories, as explained in Chapter Three, they do not have rights to the subsoil (where minerals are found) and, consequently, the impossibility of finding gold deposits in superficial layers of soil constrains their authority. However, unlike other communities living in the midst of armed conflict where young people are remarkably disempowered (e.g., See Vigh, 2006), mining community councils in Chocó keep up a certain level of authority over their territories which gives them some leeway to negotiate their working conditions. To enable some form of ASGM to continue, community leaders have been compelled to arrange with managers of unlicensed mechanised mines specific dates and times to work by looking for leftovers of gold using hand-tools in backhoes-opened shafts; that is, barequeo de máquina (Contraloría General de la Nación, 2012, p.93) [See Photograph 1 in Chapter 3].

Due to the destruction of most traditional ASGM sites, children and muchachos(as) began to take on roles involved with barequeo de máquina. The risk attached to this form of mining has increased due to the higher contact with poisonous chemicals and the presence of illegal actors in these areas, as well as the longer distances that they have to travel to reach mining sites. As fourteen year-old Elias mentioned during one of the research activities I conducted, when he goes to work at the mine called ‘Cueva del Oso’ (Bear’s Cave), he has to leave home at 2:00 am or 3:00 am because it is at least a two hours walk deep

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126 According to Law 70/1993.
127 Cueva del Oso is a mechanised mining site in Bebarama managed by various mining entrepreneurs from the area and other regions of the country.
in the rainforest to reach the mine. These findings demonstrate how child labour in extractive economies is affected and adapted during conflict to the changing constraining social forces.

The findings from my empirical data show that the Afro-Colombian tradition of ASGM has also been progressively merged with semi-mechanised forms of mining, alongside the practice of barequeo de máquina. Therefore, the sharp dividing line between artisanal methods of extraction and semi-mechanised mining has become blurred. Both take place in territories that belong to ethnic communities and include the use of hand-held tools in some phases of the extraction cycle. As Table 3 shows, most of the roles performed in ASGM (see Table 2) are also performed in semi-mechanised mining. The main differences reside in the use of mercury and electric machinery, as well as the decrease in the involvement of small children in ancillary roles after the arrival of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. As discussed in Chapter Five, both barequeo de máquina and semi-mechanised mining are locally referred to as ‘artisanal’, ‘bareque’ or ‘traditional’. By tactically referring to semi-mechanised forms of gold mining as such, local communities and mining entrepreneurs seek to reduce the stigmatisation of non-legalised mining practices, as well as to blur the lines between this and legalised sites so as to avoid prosecution.

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Table 3. Roles performed by children and muchachos(as) in semi-mechanised non-legalised gold mining before and during the control of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semi-mechanised non-legalised gold mining</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Muchachos</th>
<th>Muchachas</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Muchachos</th>
<th>Muchachas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land clearing</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excavation of deep pits</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport of food</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport of tools</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Babysitting in mine sites</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of rustic tools: shovels, hoes, axes or pans</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washing alluvial gravels</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breaking stones</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric motors and hoist operators</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amalgamation using mercury (azogue)</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present at meetings with mining entrepreneurs</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present at meetings with NSAGs.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty trading</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
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<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

✔ Roles performed with high frequency ✔ Roles performed with low frequency

(The author, 2019)
The fusion between artisanal and semi-mechanised forms of mining combined with the presence of NSAGs, made the involvement of children and muchachos(as) in this industry more dynamic. Many ASGM miners joined together to buy and use small electric machines such as motor-driven pumps, small dredgers and hoists. Local miners introduced this equipment in all the researched areas aiming to reduce physical effort and improve profits by reaching deeper layers of subsoil in less time [see Photo collage 1]. Consequently, it has become usual for muchachos(as) to take a more active part in manoeuvring mechanised equipment on a regular basis during the mining process.

Photo collage 1: Semi-mechanised gold mining, in Unión Panamericana, using hoists and electric motors in the mining extraction process, and involving the participation of women, men and muchachos (The author, 2016).

Furthermore, children and adults started to take cross-over responsibilities in diverse roles for short shifts (Tubb, 2015, p.727). As discussed in the next subsection, one muchacho(a) can simultaneously perform multiple roles that are functional to various actors and types of mining (e.g., serving as a
messenger for NSAGs, babysitting a sibling, and breaking stones in mine sites). As Robinson described during a charla, “there is not a single thing inside the mine that muchachos do not do. Some say, ‘I work on the machines’, others work pumping water, others are barequeando. They [youths] look for work opportunities like that.”\textsuperscript{129} Robinson’s account challenges mainstream perceptions of child labour in mines as being only in ASGM, and it also demonstrates that hazardous forms of child labour are not always carried out under linear hierarchical lines where children are the exploited and adults are the exploiters. These findings accord with the discussion presented in Chapter Five regarding the forging of relationships of interdependence between children and adults (Punch, 2004, p.94). This diversification of working functions became more evident in mechanised forms of mining, as discussed in the next subsection.

6.1.2 Muchachos(as) and medium-scale mechanised gold mining

The introduction of mechanised mining widened the range of working functions available for young people around the whole extraction process. The use of dragon dredgers, backhoes, bulldozers and the expansion of mining to medium scale units required a larger workforce\textsuperscript{130} and more technical operations. It was possible to establish through several informal conversations with miners that adolescents have participated in this type of mining. One of them mentioned that he started five years ago when he was 16 years-old. Although managers and owners of mechanised mining sites seem to be aware of the illegality of employing underage people, testimonies of various participants corroborate the participation of muchachos in this type of mining. As Table 4 illustrates, working functions where participants reported that

\textsuperscript{129} Charla, Bebarama, 08 February 2017 [Author’s translation].

\textsuperscript{130} It is estimated that semi-mechanised sites require around six workers whereas each dredger needs between four to eight workers. Mine sites that use backhoes require between 18 to 25 workers (Tierra Digna, 2016, p.29)
muchachos could be involved included a range of occupations: land clearing using machetes [see Picture 3 in Photo collage 2] to machinery and backhoes operation; amalgamation using mercury and cyanide; carpet washing [see Picture 4 in Photo collage 2]; cleaning and cooking; and fluvial or terrestrial transport of supplies, gold, or money. The participation of young people in mechanised mining dramatically changed the social division of labour which is no longer linked only to the subsistence economy of mining families.

Photo collage 2: 1. A gold mining dragon dredger in Rio Quito. 2. A gold mining dragon dredger and a backhoe working in Rio Quito. 3. Indigenous muchachos and adults using machetes to clear the land that dredgers later dig up in the search for gold. 4. Carpets used inside dragon dredgers to extract gold from the river in Rio Quito (The author, 2016).
Table 4. Roles performed by children and muchachos(as) in fully mechanised non-legalised gold mining (medium scale) during the control of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role Description</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Muchachos</th>
<th>Muchachas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exploration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land clearing</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backhoe driving</td>
<td></td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being present at meetings with local communities.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extraction and transformation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery operators in dredgers</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backhoe and bulldozer driving</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amalgamation using mercury and cyanide</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guisas [cooking and cleaning]</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpet washing</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport of food, gold, supplies or money</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human shields during military operations</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be present at meetings with NSAGs.</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sale of gold to intermediaries</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extortion payments</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ✔ Roles performed with high frequency
- ✔ Roles performed with low frequency

(The author, 2019)
Despite the fact that there are more working functions available, there has not been a corresponding increase in job security, and many jobs are done mainly by incoming people. While conducting the field research for this study, it was possible to observe how local youths compete with a floating population of two types of fortune-seekers. One type is made up of people from neighbouring regions (i.e., Antioquia, Cauca and Risaralda), many of whom have vast experience working in mines. As the secretary of one of the community councils in Rio Quito interviewed mentioned:

Local leaders requested that owners of dredgers hire at least two or three people from the community for each dredger. Some people managed to work, but then they said that they preferred to hire outsiders due to the military operatives made by the government and the security conditions. It was an excuse used to deny work to members of the community […] there are young people working in the dredgers, but most of them aren’t from the community.

The other group of fortune-seekers is made up of young people who choose to mine as a “trajectory loop” (Boehm, 2006, p.171). This loop occurs when muchachos(as) from mining areas who have moved to live in other cities come back to their native towns to work for a set time aiming to return to ‘normal’ or previous livelihood trajectories. In the quest for social becoming these returnees leave formal work in other regions to try their luck in mining villages for a couple of months. The findings also demonstrate that young miners are not always from equivalent disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or from local mining villages.

As discussed in Chapter Five, mining is appealing enough to warrant taking many risks if necessary. Despite all the risks attached to the performance of non-legalised mechanised mining, working in this sector is beyond attractive.

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131 In 2016, Chocó was reported to have one of the highest unemployment rates of Colombia (10.7%) (DANE, 2017)
132 Interview, Rio Quito, 03 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
Muchachos can earn more money working in a dredger or driving a backhoe for few months than they can in years of formal low-skilled jobs.

However, talking about money and net salaries with miners was extremely difficult due to the illegal status of dredgers and the military persecution some have suffered. Nevertheless, during informal conversations I held inside a dredger with miners, I ascertained that, unlike ASGM, dredger miners receive monthly salaries. Payments could range between COP 2,700,000 (£713) to COP 3,500,000 (£924) depending on the role performed. If one takes into account that the minimum wage in Colombia for the year 2016 was COP 689,454 (£168) a month, it is clear why working in dredgers is very tempting for locals and outsiders. On the other hand, working with backhoes could mean receiving lower salaries than working in a dredger; however, it is still attractive since miners could receive weekly payments in cash on backhoes. As one muchacho mentioned during a charla, “what we like the most about mining [with backhoes] is that every day we work here we ‘see the money’ [receive cash], it is not a lot, but we earn around COP 100,000 (£26.5) every three or four days”.

Furthermore, the empirical data collected in this study demonstrates that there is no unique pattern of participation in unlicensed mining. For example, although the managers and owners of the mechanised sites are the ones that carefully watch over the production and trade of extracted gold, on some occasions muchachos are in charge of selling gold to intermediaries or extracting extortion payments for NSAGs and criminal organisations [see Table 4]. As analysed below in Section 6.2, one muchacho(a) can perform various roles, including armed and non-armed tasks, and the incentives such as the money and time scales associated with the performance of these working functions are not fixed. Consequently, children and young people follow

\[133\] Informal conversation with miners at a dragon dredger, Rio Quito, 15 November 2016.
\[134\] Charla, young miner, Rio Quito, 9 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
different courses of action in these settings. Here, again, mainstream conceptualisations of such working children as miners confined to ore exploitation in family-based units are challenged by this fluidity in the performance of roles.

The mechanisation of mining also exacerbated segregation around gender lines in the roles performed by boys and girls. As is noticeable when comparing Tables 2, 3 and 4, girls and muchachas have been particularly affected by the industrialisation of gold mining. The mechanised extraction of gold is a predominantly male economic activity (Cuvelier, 2017, p.205) since this method of extraction implies the performance of more physically demanding roles. Therefore, although both girls and boys have adjusted to the shifts and changes that have taken place during the Colombian armed conflict, as Table 3 illustrates, muchachas in semi-mechanised mining usually do not engage in land clearing, excavation of pits or operating electric-driven motors. Moreover, they face additional constraints regarding work in semi-mechanised mine sites if they are young mothers. Childrearing in remote areas where miners remain confined for days and weeks is exceptionally difficult especially if security conditions are compromised due to the presence of NSAGs. This disparity was apparent in the research activities conducted with local communities. When male miners were asked to explain the difference between them and women in regard to mining, physical abilities and reproductive roles were pointed out:

- We work more than them [women]. We enter in the mine pits and work under dangerous conditions to find gold. The mine can bury us, but women, they just wash gravel.
- We are more complete [strong] than women. Women are not as fit as men, but... we are not as good as them in the kitchen, we are different in that sense.\(^{135}\)

\(^{135}\) Charla, male participants, 08 February 2017 [Author’s translation].
As Table 4 indicates, inequality in the sexual division of labour became much more evident in regard to mechanised medium-scale mining. During an interview, some officials in charge of tackling unlicensed mining asserted that they had found, although to a lesser extent than men, very skilful women working in non-legalised mechanised mine sites, responsible for the provision of petrol, machinery or hiring personnel.\textsuperscript{136} However, during my field research, participants only identified muchachas as undertaking supporting roles and not involved in the extraction process with backhoes or dredgers. In this type of mining, males are the ones directly involved in the exploration, exploitation and trade in gold. When a mechanised miner was asked about the reasons behind the absence of women in medium-scale mining, he argued that it is due to women’s lack of daring rather than discrimination:

Some women have worked with backhoes; a job that people said was for machos [males]. But, sometimes there are not those women that say, ‘Let’s work!’ I mean, they do not have the gallantry to go and look for a job, that is what has been lacking, but not that they are discriminated.\textsuperscript{137}

Beyond bravery, women face great constraints on participating actively in the unlicensed mine industry due to the socio-political construction of their roles. Muchachas and women are only allowed to wash the carpets used by dragon dredgers or informally work as cleaning ladies and cooks (locally known as guisas). Although most guisas are adults, some research participants mentioned that this role was also performed by 17 to 18 year-old muchachas. Women and muchachas also rewash carpets, seeking to find leftovers of gold near the already washed gravel. According to Maria,\textsuperscript{138} earnings from washing carpets are precarious and uncertain. There are days when she can earn COP 10,000 (£2.60) and others when she earns COP 60,000 (£16.00). However, carpet

\textsuperscript{136} Interview, police officers UNIMIL, Bogotá, 22 December 2016.
\textsuperscript{137} Informal conversation with miner, Unión Panamericana, 9 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
\textsuperscript{138} Interview Paimadó, May 5, 2017
washing, as well as barequeo de máquina, are the main ways in which artisanal miners’ dependence on mining entrepreneurs is consolidated. For instance, on some occasions, when six or more women including muchachas go to one dredger at the same time, the manager does not let any of them wash the carpets arguing that there might be possible problems between them. These informal working roles rely on the unpredictable ‘goodwill’ of dredger managers, the social networks in place, and sometimes on sexual favours, as discussed in Section 6.2.3 below. As a consequence of the limitations faced by muchachas and women, they experience deteriorating conditions of economic dependence and vulnerability.

Likewise, as Table 5 shows in the next section, girls and muchachas have, to a lesser extent, also joined NSAGs as combatants, militia, messengers, informants and lookouts. Local leaders asserted that there is a particular preference for employing boys and muchachos in these working functions. As Marisol, a local leader from Union Panamericana, asserted, “where NSAGs are, there is a stain on youth. You know that they go with them, especially if they are boys because with the girls they virtually don’t get into it […] some boys feel that they will get respect, like saying: ‘I can do it, I am the macho’”.

These findings reveal how male and female young miners are not equally affected by the social transformations that have occurred due to the arrival of illicit actors. Meanwhile, existing conditions of mechanised mining have reinforced the social status of men as the ones in control of income and work opportunities, placing muchachas under dramatically exacerbated conditions of inequality and subjection.

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139 Locals and authorities interviewed did not mention the participation of girls or muchachas as guards, extortionist, hitmen or kidnappers.
140 Informal conversation with social leader, Unión Panamericana, 9 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
The empirical findings in this study provide a new understanding of the transformations and configurations of the working functions of child labourers in extractive economies. By examining the social forces and transformations against which children and muchachos(as) navigate during wartime, I deconstructed the umbrella concept of child labour in mines. Echoing the ideas of Reynolds (2004, p.264), this section demonstrates that the mechanisation of ASGM, and the involvement of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs, meant that some of the peacetime roles that working children traditionally performed were combined, transformed or eliminated. Moreover, most artisanal miners, including young people who are not directly enrolled in dredgers or medium-scale mechanised mining, have been placed in a chronic state of dependence on the owners of backhoes and dredgers. Overall, these changes have also led to greater segregation along gender lines than was evident in ASGM.

In the following section, I examine how working youngsters have adapted to these constraints and power relationship shifts by finding alternative social navigation strategies including criminal activities. In order to scrutinise the supposedly rigid borderlines between the different categories of the ‘worst forms of child labour’, I pay particular attention to the transition and intersection of armed and unarmed roles.

### 6.2 Adaptation and transition between armed and unarmed roles in working children’s quest for survival

Previous academic analyses of the participation of children in mineral mining has disregarded the particularities of the performance of this activity in conflict-affected settings. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, some scholars (see Hilson, 2010, p.450; Plotter, 2016, p.1016) have suggested that the risks taken by child miners in ASGM are akin to hazardous tasks in agriculture. This kind of
analogy only takes into account the experience of children during peacetime and neglects the experiences of child labourers in contexts where industrialised forms of mining have replaced traditional forms of gold extraction. This study found that on top of danger of corporal impairment, the performance of child labour in mines during wartime is especially risky due to the interaction with NSAGs and military persecution by the national army regarding unlicensed mining.

As discussed in Chapter Two, mainstream studies of under 18 year-olds’ involvement with NSAGs have analysed the experience of these children during resource-fuelled conflicts through the lens of ‘child soldiering’; that is, their involvement as combatants. Therefore, it has been claimed that the participation of children in other labour activities during an armed conflict is a coincidental overlap or side effect (see IPEC, 2005, p.30; Bales, Trood and Williamson, 2009, p.107; Le Billon, 2009, p.346). The findings of this research challenge these theories and demonstrate that non-combatant roles are crucial work functions rather than subsidiary ones. Linked to the tactical agency exerted by children and muchachos(as) in their everyday lives, the empirical data I gathered suggests that working children are flexible beings who can adapt and negotiate the conditions within the constrained seascapes in which they work. Therefore, in mining-and-conflict–affected areas, the analytical borderline between child miners and child combatants is ambiguous.

This part of the chapter moves to the examination of the analytical and practical discussions around the experience of children navigating between armed and unarmed roles in the service of NSAGs in mining areas. This navigation involves movement within interrelated networks in unpredictable multi-layered scenarios. Likewise, it implies the use of wit and shrewdness to plan and envision actions and future outcomes, flexibility, and the capacity to adapt
to “get the best out of a difficult situation” (Vigh, 2006, p.127). I analyse the adaptation of working children, and how the pre-conflict division of labour in mining villages facilitated the use of children in various capacities in the extraction of gold during the Colombian armed conflict.

6.2.1 Pre-conflict division of labour in mining areas as the foundation of child labour during wartime

Following Roshani (2013, p.64), it is possible to argue that the internal armed conflict in Colombia did not create child labour in gold mines. As the previous section demonstrates, the pre-existent structures of child labour were transformed by the mechanisation of mining and capitalised on by NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. Similarly, just as the armed conflict did not create child labour in gold mines, the recruitment of children for armed conflict did not begin to take place in Chocó when NSAGs began to extort money and control gold extraction. As illustrated in Table 5, children from mining areas were recruited as combatants and used as militiamen or informants before NSAGs began to operate in their area. As the legal representative of the Community Council of the Popular Peasant Organization of the Alto Atrato (COCOMOPOCA) explained during an interview:

The ELN [National Liberation Army] recruited youths between the age of 16 and 17, in the mining areas of Lloró and Bagadó, who are still fighting in those armed groups. […] It was especially between 1986 and 2008 that these child recruitments took place. After that, their involvement was different as some [muchachos] feel sympathy or receive promises of money or food for their families. In some cases, they migrated from the ELN to paramilitary groups.141

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141 Interview, Legal representative community council COCOMOPOCA, Quibdó, 12 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
It is worth noting that this situation is not unique to the Colombian case. In Sierra Leone, for example, as Rosen (2005, p.90) explains, the involvement of children from diamond districts in war during the 1970s was built upon political structures existent during peacetime. During this conflict, “many joined illegal mining operations and became miners or soldiers or both” (Rosen, 2005, p.70). Likewise, the ILO (2006) reported that, during the second Congolese War (1998-2003), children from eastern mining areas of the DRC were “doubly exploited” (p.5), being either forced to work in mining camps or abducted as combatants.
Table 5. Roles performed by children and muchachos(as) in the service of NSAGs and criminal organisations before and during the control of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs over mining sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tasks under the control of NSAGs in mining areas</th>
<th>BEFORE</th>
<th>DURING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in meetings organised by NSAG</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of meetings for NSAGs with</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communities and miner entrepreneurs</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combatants</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messengers</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informants</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic tasks</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual exploitation</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lookouts</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militiaman</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td>✔</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guards of mine sites</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extortionist</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodyguards</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitmen</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnappers of miners</td>
<td>✔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ✔ Roles performed with high frequency
- ❑ Roles performed with low frequency

(The author, 2019)
However, whereas the ILO presents child combatants and child miners as separate entities, Rosen (2005) opens the analytical and practical possibility of considering the existence of children working in both capacities. Nonetheless, in these studies, the adaptation and transition between roles or the interaction between child miners and child combatants are unclear. Moreover, it is not explicit, which drivers are the determinants of becoming a child combatant, a child miner, or both.

Beyond acknowledgement, it is crucial to determine how the interaction between working functions occurs and whether they are performed in parallel or separately. This study demonstrates that the adaptation and transition of children and young people between armed and unarmed follow complex trajectories. Their experiences should not be reduced to the classification of children as miners and combatants. There are also children and muchachos(as) who work at multiple capacities in the service of NSAGs but whose experiences do not necessarily square with existing categorisations. As discussed in the following subsections, the existent ‘mess’ and volatility of mining-and-conflict-affected areas call for an alternative analysis that underlines the overlaps and dynamic characteristic of their labour pathways.

6.2.2 Are ‘child combatants’ and ‘child miners’ separate categories of children?

As discussed above and elaborated on in the following chapter, the ILO and legal frameworks regarding the worst forms of child labour classify child combatants and child miners as separate entities. Some of the local leaders, as well as interviewed former members of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, also supported this apparently obvious distinction. According to their accounts, although some members of armed groups perform unarmed functions, those unarmed tasks do not include direct participation in the gold extraction process.
Therefore, adults and young people can transit between unarmed tasks to armed roles, but they usually do not perform these functions simultaneously. One of the local leaders working for the Quibdó Diocese explained during an interview that guerrilla groups use children in armed roles as lookouts of mining sites and coca crops, but it is uncommon to find child combatants directly involved in the extraction of gold:

Many children were used for coca crop surveillance for example. The mere fact that they were recruited is already a crime because a child does not have to be in the war. Regarding mining, I never saw – I mean with my own eyes – I never saw a guerrilla child doing mining. Yes, they did watch over the miners, the miners were working, and they watched, and the children were skilful because those children were trained to kill, those children as from the age of 14 were trained to kill.¹⁴²

Echoing the perception of this local leader, Pablo, a former paramilitary combatant from the mining zone of Itsmina, was very emphatic in saying that AUC (to which he belonged) never had mines as people used to believe.¹⁴³ For him and three female counterparts interviewed, mining is an economic activity they did before joining the armed group and after their demobilisation. Their functions as active combatants were not associated with the extraction of gold. When I asked Emilio, a former commander of FARC-EP who joined this armed group in 1979, to explain how this NSAG functioned in mining districts he described how military and non-military roles although equally important for the operation of FARC-EP, were separated:

[...] the militias have two levels of participation. There is one level of the militia that is eminently civilian that has nothing to do with the use of weapons. And there is another level of militia that has to do with the use of weapons because it fulfils a military and security mission to safeguard the communities directly in the surroundings where they are. The militias remain in their communities, not in other areas where we have

¹⁴² Interview, Quibdó, 09 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
¹⁴³ Interview, ACR- Itsmina, 18 April 2017.
operated. It has to be there because it is there where they have their attachment, where they have their leadership, where they are known.\textsuperscript{144} Similarly, three other ex-commanders of FARC-EP interviewed claimed that there was a division between milicianos (unarmed militiamen) and combatants. Those who joined FARC-EP troops from mining areas “have to leave mining behind and take a rifle to dedicate themselves to the military part”.\textsuperscript{145} Nonetheless, it is not clear under what conditions this allegedly permanent passage from gold mining to armed fighting takes place.

The experience of Jean Carlos sheds light on how some child miners make this transition. Jean Carlos was a miner who worked alongside his parents and ten siblings in a mining site using hand-tools and an electric pump until he joined FARC-EP at the age of 14. After receiving military training, FARC-EP capitalised on his experience as a miner, in particular, his good connections with the local mining community. Although he no longer worked extracting gold, he was responsible for organising political-ideological meetings with locals (including children) from his community and neighbouring villages. He was also in charge of collecting ‘voluntary’ taxes from miners (extortions), and other unarmed roles. For him, this was a rewarding experience since he became an example to follow for his community, and he was also able to support the miners of his town:

\begin{quote}
After four months of being a guerrilla fighter I returned to my community to arrange meetings, and it is very nice to get to your own community and explain to your own people what one wants to do, to be an example for your community [...] Yes, I had a relationship with mining [after his recruitment as combatant] as someone who accompanied the meetings of artisanal miners, the small mining entrepreneurs. I also participated a few times in the collection of ‘taxes’ [extortions], but miners do that voluntarily. One explains to them what those resources are for; let’s say for the purchase of the camouflages that one has or, since at that time we were
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{144}Interview, Quibdó, 20 April 2017 [Author’s translation].
\textsuperscript{145}Interview, Vidri, 15 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
at war, for the purchase of armament. So that’s why we made the collection of taxes, for us to subsist […]

Yes, it was normal for FARC-EP to arrive in that region [Bebarama], to hold meetings with the communities, to take the message to the people, to the young people, the elderly, children, because it is this that we do within the organisation, we spread the message of why we fight and what we want for the Colombian people.\textsuperscript{146}

As illustrated in Tables 2, 3 and 4, children and muchachos(as) involved in all types of mining participate in meetings with NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. Meetings are essential for getting local approval and access to mineral deposit in collective territories, as well as establishing rules and arrangements. As discussed in Chapter Three, since Afro-Colombian communities are the collective owners of the land, good relationships are crucial to control and remain in the territory. The operation of NSAGs in mining areas has heavily relied on the support of local communities which have included the establishment of grassroots networks, militiamen, and informants.

This need for good relationships with local communities resembles those formed by Mayi-Mayi militias in eastern DRC (Laudati, 2013). These militias heavily rely on the support of local authorities and the establishment of “business-oriented civilian networks” (p.42) for control of resources. One of the local leaders and experts on mining described, in astonishment, how FARC-EP used to give food, alcohol, and money in cash to leaders who attended the meetings.\textsuperscript{147} It is possible to argue that organising meetings is a highly prized task for armed groups which aim to control and extort revenues from gold mining. Meetings are spaces of interaction where local support is granted. Moreover, they are spaces where children start their transition from one type of role to another. In this sense, they constitute nexus where armed roles are notably connected to unarmed ones.

\textsuperscript{146} Interview, Vidri, 15 May 2017 [Author’s translation].

\textsuperscript{147} Interview, local leader and official from the Quibdó Diocese, 09 March 2017.
Guerrilla groups’ interest in involving young local miners can be linked with the need to take advantage of their knowledge of the territory, local communities and mining. As Benjamin, a local UN’s ex-consultant who researched human rights violation in mining communities of Chocó, explained, children perform dual roles as miners and combatants. According to him, guerrilla groups have a particular interest in recruiting child miners in armed and unarmed roles due to their familiarity with their territory:

Many of those children that the guerrilla group recruits end up doing mining because the guerrillas also manage this business; well... we are talking about the area of Bebara and Bebarama. The mines located there are theirs, there is no one else [i.e., other NSAGs], they are the ones that manage their mines with personnel that are the ones that, let’s say, take care of this business. [...] There are some children who – as they had previously been working – understand, or they see their parents carrying out all the mining work on the bareque and on the machines. They put them [the children] to work on that side [of the operation] given the proximity or access they have, but they also take part in the war front. That is, they do not disassociate one thing from the other, only that the profession or what the person is going to do is mining, but that person is also part of the groups’ ranks.148

While it is possible that ‘full time’ young combatants do not perform roles excavating mine pits, as asserted by ex-members of NSAGs and some social leaders (as presented above), the experience of Jean Carlos echoes Benjamin’s hypothesis on the capitalisation of child miners’ knowledge. Furthermore, it also reflects a transition and connection between miners and combatants, and how the working functions under the control of those organisations within the gold exploitation process are not confined to the excavation process.

With the arrival of NSAGs and criminal organisations to mining villages, the combining of different armed and unarmed roles was inexorable. Emilio, the FARC-EP commander referred to above, also recognised the possibility that, in

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148 Interview, Benjamin, Quibdó, 13 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
other mining regions, some miners who also work as informants would have taken part in armed fighting as combatants where FARC-EP operated:

One does not rule out that at certain guerrilla nuclei in some areas – as we have been at very crucial moments in the confrontation – there may have been militia leaders who took personnel [miners] to some of these activities – but usually when these situations occur they are liable to be held accountable immediately.\(^{149}\)

These accounts demonstrate that, despite the apparently clear distinction between the working functions of miners and combatants, it is not always easy to establish a sharp dividing line between working functions. The next subsection presents several accounts and experiences, gathered during the field research, to interrogate in more detail the allegedly clear division between miners and combatants in the volatile and multi-layered context of mining-and-conflict-areas of Chocó.

### 6.2.3 Children who are neither solely child miners nor solely combatants

In relation to determining whether mining roles and those undertaken in the service of armed groups are performed simultaneously or not, my primary research findings suggest that both situations may occur. As discussed in the previous subsection, in some areas, participants argued that child combatants exist separately from child miners; although one child can transit from one role to the other, he or she is never in both at the same time. Conversely, a more significant group of participants argued that some children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas perform both roles in parallel or fulfil other functions that do not necessarily conform to the labels of miners or combatants but are still in the service of NSAGs and other illicit actors.

\(^{149}\) Interview, Quibdó, 20 April 2017 [Author’s translation].
Therefore, in the grey terrains of action where children and muchachos(as) operate in mining-and-conflict-affected-areas, their trajectories between armed and unarmed roles are not easy to identify. Children and muchachos(as) are acutely aware of the existing stigmatisation around mining and the dangers attached to the armed actions of NSAGs. Thus, when gold mining and armed groups interweave, young people’s activities usually function under secret tangled webs of actors and rules. Although not all disadvantaged children and muchachos(as) get involved in hazardous forms of work in mining areas, most of the collected accounts and testimonies suggest that in practice some children and young people do perform various ASGM and semi- and fully mechanised mining tasks, as discussed in Section 6.1, as well as different auxiliary roles in the service of NSAGs. Thus, the actual work patterns of young people challenge the categorisation used to separate their activities as exclusively as mining in peacetime or combating armed structures during wartime.

When NSAGs decided to extend their sources of revenue towards control, extortion and (in some cases) extraction of gold, young people from both mining and urban areas became especially attractive regarding the functioning of this ‘criminal resource portfolio’. As discussed in Chapter Three, in their analysis of the relationship between the drug trade and illegal gold mining in Colombia, Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo (2016, p.83) suggest that the concept of a “criminal resource portfolio” refers to the “simultaneous participation in the extraction of multiple resources as funding sources for illegal organizations”. Examination of the illegal extraction of gold through the concept of ‘portfolio’ highlights that this is only one activity within a broader range of financial revenues (i.e., kidnappings, looting, or the drugs trade). Understanding the multiplicity and dynamic nature of criminal resource portfolios helps to explain the functioning of NSAGs in mining regions, as well as the reasons behind the use of young people in rural and urban areas, and the combination of armed
and unarmed roles that young people currently undertake, as illustrated in Table 5. It also helps explain why, due to the control exerted by NSAGs in mining areas, the lines between combatants and miners has become imprecise.

It may be noted that the roles performed by children and muchachos(as) in the service of NSAGs and criminal organisations are presented (in Table 5) separately from the working functions performed by them in ASGM, semi- and fully mechanised mining (as presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively). However, this tabular organisation does not overlook the fact that the roles of mining currently interplay with those in the service of illegal organisations. Conversely, it facilitates the identification of the working functions of children within the messy terrains of action where they operate. For instance, armed functions associated with the gold supply chain are no longer confined to rural areas. In the urban areas of municipalities like Quibdó, Itsmina or Novita, NSAGs and criminal organisations have created interconnected networks to buy machinery, provisions for mine site workers, and control exchange houses where gold is commercialised. Therefore, children from urban areas were also more likely to become involved in mining, interact and work for armed groups to different extents.

In various cases, NGOs have identified criminal organisations as responsible for threatening, kidnapping and murdering miners and mining entrepreneurs.\(^{150}\) As Table 5 shows, the involvement of adolescents in armed roles expanded when NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs started to exert control over mining sites. Therefore, the range of options of working functions of muchachos widened from positions as combatants to those such as bodyguards, kidnappers, extortionist or hitmen. The scope of this depends on the NSAG, their criminal

\(^{150}\) Informal conversation with an official from the Mission to support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP-OEA), Quibdó, 25 January 2017.
resource portfolio and the geographical area they control, as well as the levels of protection and exposure of children and young people (Vigh, 2009, p.430).

Even though most milicianos are adults, some participants reported the use of children and muchachos(as) by NSAGs for this role, as well as guards and lookouts of mine sites. In the eyes of locals, these unarmed militiamen live in a limbo as they are neither full-time miners nor full-time combatants. According to Jaime,\textsuperscript{151} the milicianos are allowed by the NSAGs to live in their communities, work in mines and to be informants. Locals assert that although they know who the unarmed militiamen are, there is little they can do due to the authority exerted by guerrilla and paramilitary groups. In areas where FARC-EP operated, small children were targeted as messengers and informants. Although these roles did not directly connect children with a battlefield, they were very strategic for the functioning of this NSAG. During an imaginative research session, children discussed their interaction with guerrilla members between themselves, as well as the economic incentives some received in exchange:

Author: When in the mine, have you seen gangs or guerrilla groups?
Various children: “Yes, we have seen the guerrillas in the bareque!”

Author: What do they do?
Girl, 9 years: “Guard.”
Boy, 13 years: “Sometimes they send us to do errands.”
Boy, 11 years: “We talk to them.”

Author: Do they give you money for running errands?
Boy, 11 years: “There is no reason why I should run errands for them!”
Boy, 10 years: “I do not receive money from them either.”
One boy, 11 years, questioned the others who said they have not received money from the guerrillas: “One day I ran an errand for them, and they gave me money. Every time they came, they gave us money. Why do you say no?”
Boy, 13 years: “One asks them for money, and they give it to us.”
Girl, 9 years “I did not receive money from them.”

\textsuperscript{151}Charla, Bebarama, 24 March 2017.
Author: How much money did they give you?
Various children: “They gave me around COP 2,000 (£0.50) / COP 2,500 (£0.65) / COP 1,500 (£0.40)”.

Similarly, one of the officials from the NGO, War Child, asserted that some children from Rio Quito have also worked as informants reporting the presence of boats or transporting extortion money and that they were also used as informants in the service of both the national army and NSAGs. According to this interviewee, some youngsters have been killed in Quibdó for giving information to either side. Understandably, people are afraid of reporting these cases. His evidence suggests that social construction of age is a central determinant in the involvement of children with NSAGs. When they are small, most of their ancillary roles are performed sporadically. Moreover, he confirmed that, although some children decide not to get involved with NSAGs, they are aware of their presence in mine sites. Furthermore, in some cases, young people are also put at risk due to their use as informants by military forces.

Beyond the practical difficulties involved in drawing a theoretical dividing line between child miners and child combatants, children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas are exposed to real danger and in some cases have been targeted by the military. They have been in the midst of armed confrontations with the national army in mine sites. In the words of one of the commanders of Joint Task Force Titan of the Colombian Army, one of the strategies used to hinder military operations against non-legalised mining is the use of children as human shields by local miners, including those associated with NSAGs [see Table 4]:

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152 Imaginative session, Bebarama, 27 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
153 Interview, Quibdó, 10 May 2017.
154 Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta Titán.
There aren’t only adults; there are children in the mines of 13, 16-17 years of age. They get on the machines. They know that minors cannot be interrogated or do anything [...] minors do not pay jail time. The owners of the dredgers are located near the schools to avoid the destruction of machinery and bombings. In each operation against mining, we find one or two minors.\textsuperscript{155}

These assertions were also replicated in other interviews conducted with police and military officers. During a private meeting to which I was invited with members of UNIMIL, think tanks, and the Ombudsman office,\textsuperscript{156} a video was displayed showing how during military operations, children are tied up on top of backhoes. Likewise, local people are gathered around backhoes and bulldozers with wood sticks and machetes to avoid the destruction of the machinery and mining supplies.

In other cases, child miners have been singled out and threatened by armed groups. One of the psychologists at the mayor’s office in Unión Panamericana, recalled the case of a 13 year-old boy from an artisanal mining family who dropped out of school to join a semi-mechanised mining site.\textsuperscript{157} According to her, the boy became noticeable when he started to receive high weekly amounts of money [around COP 200,000 (£51)] and spent it on ‘vices’ [drugs and alcohol]. One day, people apparently associated with armed groups came on motorbikes and asked the boy to leave the town. The psychologist had been assured that the boy left the town, but local authorities never knew to which NSAG the men belonged since they were not wearing camouflage. These accounts and the audio-visual material shared by members of UNIMIL mentioned above reveal how functional children are for NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs – and how vital is to deconstruct child labour in mines as a category and living experience in conflict-affecting settings.

\textsuperscript{155} Interview with military personnel from the Joint Task Force Titan, Quibdó, 12 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
\textsuperscript{156} Confidential meeting, Bogota, 26 May 2017.
\textsuperscript{157} Interview, Unión Panamericana, 15 December 2016.
Drawing on Vigh (2006, p.134), it is argued here that, in these volatile scenarios, children and muchachos(as) adapt their working patterns to uncertain labour conditions where most roles are not necessarily fixed. As illustrated in the following accounts shared by participants during an imaginative research session, the social navigation of children and muchachos(as) takes place in overlapping networks within which astute reading of the conditions of their surrounding environment is needed:

Author: Which type of mining do you do?
Various children: “Artisanal”

Author: And, mechanised too?
Muchacho, 15 years: “One also goes with his batea to mechanised sites, or help to guard or help the chief of the corte [mine site].”

Author: What do you do when you work?
Muchacho, 15 years: “We go to the barrier, or wherever they [mines managers] let us in or if they do not let us in, one goes to wash what they leave [Barequeo de máquina], and that is where one finds his grain of gold”.

Author: What is the hardest thing to do at work or what you like the least?
Boy, 8 years: “The hardest thing is to break stones”.

These accounts reflect the continual negotiations between managers of mine sites and the flexible workforce of which the young people are a part. Whether children and muchachos are enrolled in mining or ancillary armed roles, flexibility, negotiation and adaptation are essential skills in the attempt to grab the few possibilities left on the fringes of non-legalised mining. For instance, in the performance of semi-mechanised mining, adults rely on the multi-skilling of young miners. Children and muchachos(as) tailor their skills to the manager’s needs or the options they provide, aiming to seize the chances available. If a muchacho(a) is not allowed or able to do ‘role A’ (e.g., operate a motor-driven pump), he or she should be ready to do ‘role B’ (e.g., wash gravel). Negotiation
skills are also necessary to sell the gold extracted. The storage, transport and trade of gold usually take place within the communities through local or external intermediaries that regulate this informal market. Here, some families rely on the negotiating expertise of children to sell the gold they extract. In others, muchachos or older youths are entrusted by younger children to go to neighbouring towns to sell gold the children find.

In other cases, children mix their childhood experiences with sporadic tasks in mine sites or armed roles in other areas. During an informal conversation with semi-mechanised miners in Unión Panamericana, in low voices, they mentioned how the police, alongside the staff of the local school, found weapons inside the institution. According to them, youngsters from the region sometimes work in neighbouring villages with gangs and armed groups.\textsuperscript{158} Thus, the temporal extent and incentives associated with these roles fluctuate. This situation was highlighted when, during one of my visits to Bebarama, a mining entrepreneur was kidnapped at night by a group of four armed people. Cash, jewellery and gold were stolen from his house and the mine site under his management. During several informal conversations, some of the witnesses told me that one of the members of that unidentified armed group was a 13 year-old boy from a nearby mining area, who was described as a “little gunman whose hand did not shake when shooting”.\textsuperscript{159} Both situations demonstrate how children from mining areas can navigate between roles, labels and categories applied to them and their work. Moreover, they demonstrate how “the politics of survival and the quest of social becoming” (Vigh, 2006, p.111) of muchachos(as) in the researched settings can span school attendance, gold mining during their school holidays, and sporadic geographical navigation to neighbouring areas to work in specific tasks for a criminal organisation.

\textsuperscript{158} Informal conversation with semi-mechanised miners, Unión Panamericana, 09 December 2017.
\textsuperscript{159} Informal conversation with locals, Bebarama, 27 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
Within the specific intersection between armed conflict and gold mining, some children and muchachos have expanded their scope of action to armed positions and bridged their experiences as ASGM child labourers with various forms of illegality, criminality and working functions in the service of unlicensed-mechanised miners and NSAGs. Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter Five, grabbing the possibilities available is neither a straightforward process, nor is it one free of hazards. Alongside the ‘bravery’ to take risks, forging and maintaining networks, as well as “episodic, flexible, and negotiable” social ties, are needed to have access to circuits of work, resources and influences (Wells, 2011, p.326).

Due to the flexibility, adaptation and constant navigation of children and muchachos(as), their involvement with armed groups, particularly in urban areas, can be temporary or limited to specific tasks. Therefore, tracking and reporting these cases is not easy or even possible due to the existent institutional limitations in these settings, as examined in Chapter Seven. Local authorities have not openly recognised the relationship between unlicensed gold mining and the high levels of criminality and mortality rate of young people in urban areas of Chocó. Moreover, the officials in charge of reporting those cases classified most of the perpetrators as unknown. Meanwhile, NGOs and social leaders blame illicit economies and the presence of armed actors, including criminal bands, as the main factors of violence (Colombia Plural, 2016).

Similarly, the empirical data suggests that sexual exploitation is one of the hazardous pathways followed by girls and muchachas in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Most participants in this study pointed out prostitution and the

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160 The mortality rate of young people in Quibdó for the year 2016, although underreported, was one of the highest in the country (35.84 per 100,000 inhabitants) (INML, 2017, p.121).
proliferation of brothels in mining villages as some of the consequences of mechanised gold mining.\textsuperscript{161} Sexual and commercial exploitation of young people is part of the criminal resource portfolios of NSAGs in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. In an interview, one of the officials from the Ombudsman office in Chocó referred to this illicit economy as one which is under the control of NSAGs where young people and adults from mining areas and neighbouring regions are involved.\textsuperscript{162}

However, the sexual violence inflicted on girls is not reduced to sex-for-money exchange. Muchachas have also been used as escorts or ‘wives’ by mining entrepreneurs. According to informal conversations held with locals in Bebarama, one of the wealthiest and most powerful mining entrepreneurs of the region, known as ‘\textit{El Gordo}’, has several ‘wives’ between 14 and 15 years of age.\textsuperscript{163} In other cases, managers or owners of dredgers only allow muchachas to wash carpets or work as guisas in exchange for sexual favours.\textsuperscript{164} Reports published by NGOs and governmental authorities regarding cases of sexual violence perpetrated by NSAGs in Chocó highlight the difficulty of registering these cases or even denouncing them. The main challenges encountered are associated with holding those responsible for sexual crimes accountable during the ongoing armed conflict (ABColombia, Sisma Mujer and US Office in Colombia, 2014; Flórez, 2014; Círculo de Estudios, 2015).

Thus, to sum up, unlike mainstream theorising on hazardous forms of child labour, my primary research findings demonstrate the complex issues involved in the categorisation of children’s identities and working roles during natural resource conflicts. Armed and unarmed positions have proven to be equally

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{161} Interview with official from the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation, Bogota, 01 November 2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Interview, Quibdó, 30 November 2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} Informal conversations with locals in Bebarama, 14 February 2016.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Interview with official from the Ombudsman office in Chocó, 12 November 2016.
\end{itemize}
essential to the functioning of NSAGs in mining areas where children and muchachos(as) perform various working functions at multiple levels around artisanal and mechanised mining. As such, some children and youths continually transit from mining to armed fighting; while others are only used in unarmed positions, and another significant group of children and muchachos(as) adapt and ‘sail’ within these murky seascapes by combining schooling with mining functions and sporadic armed tasks in the service of NSAGs. Meanwhile, the current legal and academic division between these two forms of child labour does not allow room to acknowledge their interconnection during resource-fuelled conflicts.

### 6.3 Conclusions

This chapter interrogated mainstream interpretations of child labour in mines by analysing the experience of children and young people in areas where extractive industries have converged with the activities of illicit actors and armed conflict. It has examined the existent analysis of child labour in mines that circumscribe children’s mining work within ASGM as a family-based activity. The examination of the working functions of children through the concepts of ‘seascape’ (Vigh, 2009) and ‘social navigation’ (Vigh, 2006) demonstrates that the trajectories followed by children and muchachos in conflict-affected areas exceed the family sphere. Thus, they have started to operate in a complex web of interconnected forms of illicit activities carried out in hiding. Moreover, the working functions in which children are involved are not static and can be entangled with various forms of mechanised mining, criminality, and roles in the service of NSAGs.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of childhood studies by formulating a comparative schema of working functions performed by children
in unlicensed gold mining. The proposed schema takes into account the social constructions of age and the significance of gender, the frequency of participation, and the changes faced in mining villages due to the arrival of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. Therefore, the identification of working functions is a step forward in understanding how different forms of child labour are affected and adapted to circumstances and constraints present during wartime. Furthermore, this study advances our knowledge of the social trajectories followed by young people to endure the industrialisation of traditional practices and the control exerted by NSAGs.

The protracted armed conflict in Colombia has impacted and changed the functioning of ASGM in turn affecting children’s working functions. Building on Reynolds (2004, p.264), the empirical data presented here demonstrates that some roles involved in ASGM that existed during peacetime have been transformed, combined or eliminated by the use of mechanised equipment and the control and extortion practices imposed by NSAGs. Furthermore, although the range of available working functions was expanded with the mechanisation of mining, the research findings indicate that local unskilled youths have been pushed to the edge of criminal activities. Competition between local miners and the migratory workforce has aggravated the constraints already faced by children and muchachos(as). Furthermore, the elimination of women as active workers in mechanised mining has worsened the gender disparity already existing in Afro-Colombian communities, and made women and girls prone to sexual abuse.

Through the examination of the roles performed by children and muchachos in ASGM and semi- and fully mechanised mining in areas controlled by armed actors, this chapter demonstrates that non-violent roles are equally crucial for NSAGs. Indeed, they allow the functioning of such groups, as well as mining
entrepreneurs, in the territory. These findings challenge assumptions that unarmed roles are less essential tasks that coincidentally overlap with armed functions. Likewise, the interaction between combatants and miners and the transitions between roles bring into question current boundaries and categories that render child miners and child combatants as separate and disconnected subjects. The existence of children who navigate and alternate between armed and unarmed roles demonstrates that mining and working for armed groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It can thus be argued that depending on the context, the NSAGs involved, and the functioning around industrialised methods of mining, various forms of child labour can coexist, intersect, and interplay.

There is neither a unique pattern of participation in unlicensed mining in these multi-layered and volatile settings, nor a unique, linear relationship between employers and employees. Due to the involvement of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs, the dependency of local miners has been consolidated, while the sphere of action of illicit actors has expanded from rural to urban areas where diverse economies of violence intersect. Some NSAGs have capitalised on the experience of muchachos(as) as former miners and members of mining communities, to act as lookouts for mining sites or to enable access to land and arrange informal taxes. The evidence I gathered shows that children and muchachos(as) are flexible beings able to read their unpredictable environment and try to expand their life chances (Vigh, 2006, p.130). Making alliances with peers and adults, adopting shifting identities, as well as using personal resources and negotiation skills, are central to finding a job position or working for NSAGs.

In conclusion, this chapter calls for a conception of child labour in mines as a social practice in constant evolvement, which presents particular features
during natural resource conflicts. If their interactions are understood as such, there is a lower risk of continuing to overlook and reinforce the situation of children who are operating under increasingly risky conditions. Building on the discussion of the working functions performed by children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas made in this chapter, the next chapter addresses the contradictions of child-protection frameworks and the subjective elements informing institutional actions, which arise from the consequent misunderstandings.
CHAPTER 7

Which working children are worth enough to be ‘saved’?

The hierarchies of child relief in mining-and-conflict-affected areas

Introduction

After examining how combined forms of hazardous work shape childhood experiences in Chapter Five, and how child workers adjust to the combination of these forms of work during wartime in Chapter Six, in this chapter, I explore the political construction of the sense of urgency and the moral imperative to protect those children through intervention agencies. Since NGOs, international and State organisations form part of the “social forces” (Vigh, 2009) present in the areas where I conducted field research, analysing how they conceptually construct the situation of children is central to examining working children’s possibilities of agency and survival.

Children as modern icons of vulnerability and humanitarian assistance have been constructed by scholars and agencies as subjects that need to be urgently protected before other categories of civilians, especially when they are in the midst of emergencies or armed conflicts (Carpenter, 2005, p.295; Smith, 2009, p.16; Suski, 2009, p.202). International organisations, as well as worldwide legal frameworks, have seen the participation of children in hazardous activities such as gold mining, drug trafficking, sexual exploitation or armed fighting as contrary to an ideal childhood and as one of ‘the worst forms of child labour’.

Therefore, all children involved in these activities are currently identified as ‘the most vulnerable’ and in need of urgent action and protection (Global Protection Cluster, 2013, p.111). However, as discussed in Chapter Two, in practice not all groups of children involved in hazardous forms of work are equally prioritised. In order to explain this imbalance in the specific case of mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Colombia, the focus is now directed towards understanding how the interviewed officials from intervention agencies perceive and assist children involved in combined forms of hazardous work.

This chapter revisits the discussion addressed in Chapter Two concerning the discursive construction of disadvantaged children as ‘privileged recipients’ of humanitarian and development action. Contrary to arguments presented in the available literature on the use of imagery of children in humanitarian interventions (Hutnyk, 2004; Carpenter, 2005; Brocklehurst, 2006, p.45; Smith, 2009; Dogra, 2012; Wells, 2013), this chapter demonstrates that not all group of vulnerable children are the “development candy of INGOs’ [international non-governmental organisations] messages” (Dogra, 2012, p.33). Despite the preference for using children as characters to call for charity and awareness, not all vulnerable children evoke equally emotive reactions and intervention. Even though some scholars have advanced critical analyses of the construction of some subjects as more worthy to be rescued than others (Höijer, 2004; Suski, 2009; Borstein, 2010; Stokes and Taylor, 2014), there is still a gap in explanations as to why this is the case, even in equally unsafe situations.

This current study is built upon the premise that the sense of urgency and worthiness during an emergency is not solely produced based on figures and statistical rates (Zelizer, 1985; Ophir, 2010; Calhoun, 2010). Decisions on the protection of working children are also a moral concept shaped by narratives, images and emotions. Using the theoretical approach proposed by Ophir (2010)
to analyse the production of humanitarian appeals through the concept of ‘catastrophization’, the first section of the chapter examines two planes of analysis: One, ‘objective’, in which the participation of children in combined hazardous forms of work is discussed as a ‘visible’ reality. And the other ‘discursive’, which corresponds to the language and categories used by legal regulation and agencies to legitimise the protection of certain groups of working children as a matter of urgency. Drawing on the primary data I gathered, the second section of this chapter examines the emotional impulses that drive officials and, therefore, institutional responses through the examination of the humanitarian and development rhetoric of ‘the most vulnerable children’ as most in need of protection. To do so, I use the approximation to the nature of humanitarianism as an “emotion-based impulse” proposed by Suski (2009, p.210) as an analytical lens, as developed in Chapter Two. Although for analytical purposes, I examine discourses and emotions separately, I argue that language, images and feelings are interconnected elements in the production of perceptions as well as praxis.

This chapter demonstrates that, despite legal frameworks on child labour and the iconic value of children in the humanitarian and development world, the positionality and individual perception of officials are central elements that drive action and inaction towards child workers. Children who undertake armed roles in NSAGs are perceived as a priority, whereas other working children who navigate the volatile “seascape” (Vigh, 2009, p.419) of mining-and-conflict-affected areas are located in a separated and less urgent spectrum of intervention. These hierarchies of suffering are informed by discursive formations as well as emotional impulses regarding disadvantaged children. Thus, despite the emblematic value of children in the humanitarian and development world, child miners are constructed as a less preferred group for intervention, particularly if they are located in conflict-affected regions.
7.1 Objective and discursive construction of hazardous forms of child labour

The conceptualisation of catastrophization proposed by Ophir (2010) facilitates the analysis of the ‘objective’ and ‘discursive’ dimensions that inform decisions regarding whether the situation of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas in Colombia could be considered as an emergency or not. As discussed in Chapter Two, catastrophization is a concept rooted in cognitive psychology and psychiatry. It refers to a process in which the perception of an event or situation as normal or tolerable is transformed into one that understands the same event as terrible or a catastrophe. It is a social and political construction that is shaped by the “cognitive bias” and subjective response of the spectator (Ophir, 2010, p.59). In the case of this study, the spectator refers to officials of State organisations and intervention agencies, and their response is represented in actions, reports, and testimonies.

Although laws are not the only references that organisations have to drive their praxis, or the only determinant of a state of emergency (Ophir, 2010, p.74), international instruments and national legislation have been the primary drivers to define, classify and approach the most vulnerable children in Colombia. As Brocklehurst (2006, p.9) points out, the existent conception of children and their relationship with adults is “tightly legislated”. Adults are conceived as those responsible for children’s protection according to the so called ‘best interest of the child’. This section examines how legal frameworks, policies and programmes conceive the situation of child workers in hazardous forms of work so as to understand how State organisations, NGOs and foreign intervention agencies frame their actions.
7.1.1 The discursive construction of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ in legal frameworks

The perception and construction of child labour in mines or armed combat as problematic and dangerous for children are very recent. As discussed in Chapter Three, Afro-Colombian communities have been involved in the extraction of gold and other minerals, since the arrival of the Spanish colonists (Herrera-Ángel, 2005). However, thanks to the construction of children as rights holders, promoted internationally by the UN, child labour in mines and armed fighting became catastrophized. Consequently, the need for governmental intervention and joint efforts to mitigate its effects on children was seen as a priority. Nevertheless, it was only after the issuing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), that the Colombian government made visible the situation of underage labourers as a socially and economically problematic situation. In 1995, a committee for the progressive elimination of child labour was established, and a year later a national plan to eradicate it was implemented with the support of international organisations (OIT and IPEC, 2009).

The subsequent ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour (1999) became a benchmark to classify working activities constructed as inadmissible for children. The category of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ includes the recruitment for use in armed conflict, sexual exploitation, illicit drugs trafficking, and any kind of slavery-like activity or forced work including mining and quarrying. The ‘worst forms of child labour’ as established by ILO, were recognised by Colombia as the most harmful activities that neglect

\[166\] The committee was established through Decree 859/1995 (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 1995)

\[167\] Such as the ILO, UNICEF, IPEC and Save the Children.
children’s rights, their dignity and integrity.\textsuperscript{168} As such, these activities were raised to the status of international priority (OIT and IPEC, 2003, p.26). The Colombian political Constitution\textsuperscript{169} and the subsequent issuance of laws to protect children, such as the Code for Children and Adolescents in 2006\textsuperscript{170}, established an imperative to protect any child from dangerous situations such as exploitative work and armed conflicts. Therefore, all legal bodies and administrative authorities were compelled to act with the best interests of the child as a central consideration. Since the issuing of ILO Convention 182, two further national plans\textsuperscript{171} and a seven years national strategy (2008-2015) were implemented in Colombia to deal with child labour in its worst forms, at national and local level.

The urgent call to protect child workers was echoed internationally by the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS). It was established that during an emergency, although children should be the focus of special attention, “given the complexity of responding to all child labour in a given context, the response should prioritise the worst forms, starting with those related to or made worse by the emergency” (Global Protection Cluster, 2013, p.111). Thus, the imperative need to act immediately to protect children affected by the worst forms of child labour without any discrimination was established, at least from a legal perspective.\textsuperscript{172} However, in practice, it is not clear how agencies or organisation determine which forms of child labour are “related to or made worse by the emergency” (ibid.), or which

\textsuperscript{168} Colombia ratified ILO Convention 182 through the Law 704/ 2001.
\textsuperscript{169} Article 44.
\textsuperscript{170} Código de Infancia y Adolescencia, Law 1098/2006. See Articles 20 and 41.
\textsuperscript{171} The National Plan II to eradicate child labour and protect young workers was implemented between 2000- 2002. The National Plan III was implemented between 2003- 2006.
\textsuperscript{172} According to the ICBF Resolution 316/2011, it is necessary to establish imperative and immediate measures by the Regional Offices to protect children and adolescents involved in mining or at risk of involvement.
group of children should be assisted first in cases where various forms of hazardous work are entangled, as in mining-and-conflict-affected areas.

Despite the recognition of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ as a priority, domestic institutions in Colombia adopted a different scale of values.\textsuperscript{173} The participation of children in mines was considered as \textit{dangerous work}, whereas their involvement with NSAGs was labelled as \textit{illicit work} (See Table 6). All the activities listed as \textit{illicit} were incorporated in the Colombian Criminal Code and treated as legal transgressions.\textsuperscript{174} On the other hand, \textit{dangerous work} such as child labour in gold mines, although harmful, is not considered a crime within Colombian legislation. To date, this division remains uncriticised at the institutional level. Therefore, policies do not acknowledge the complexity of child labour in conflict-affected areas where different types of dangerous and illicit work interplay in children’s lives.

\textsuperscript{173} For instance, see ICBF Resolution 3597/2003.
### Table 6. Categorisation of the ‘worst forms of child labour’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Illicit Work       | Commercial sexual exploitation       | • Induction, constraint or encouragement into prostitution  
|                    |                                      | • Pornography                                                                                       |
|                    |                                      | • Sexual Tourism                                                                                   |
|                    |                                      | • Trafficking for sexual exploitation                                                              |
|                    | Illegal activities associated with    | • Drug production and trafficking                                                                  |
|                    | slavery                              | • Use by delinquents for illicit purposes                                                            |
|                    |                                      | • Sale for servitude                                                                                |
|                    |                                      | • **Forced recruitment for use in armed conflict**                                                 |
| Dangerous Work     | Hazardous works due to its nature    | • **Mining**, work under water, work on the streets                                                |
|                    |                                      | • At dangerous heights, in closed spaces                                                             |
|                    |                                      | • With machinery or dangerous equipment                                                             |
|                    |                                      | • Manual transport of loads                                                                           |
|                    |                                      | • In unhealthy environments (e.g., exposure to chemicals, noise, etc.)                               |
|                    | Hazardous work due to its conditions | • Domestic work for third-parties                                                                  |
|                    |                                      | • Workdays longer than eight hours                                                                   |
|                    |                                      | • Work at night                                                                                     |
|                    |                                      | • Work without hygiene and industry safety measures                                                 |
|                    |                                      | • Work that impedes school attendance                                                                |

**Source:** (OIT and IPEC, 2003 p.30) [Translated from Spanish by the author]

The division created between illicit and dangerous forms of work brings into question the international discursive priorities concerning the worst forms of child labour, as expressed in conventions, reports and laws, where only activities considered illicit are catastrophized and regarded as emergencies. Meanwhile, those labelled as dangerous are not seen as urgent, and are reported, studied and approached separately. In the particular case of mining-and-
conflict-affected areas, child labourers in mines and child labourers in illicit activities are seen as disconnected subjects and located on independent spectrums of intervention. This division is not merely an analytical separation since, depending on which category child workers are placed in, their recognition as victims is established, as well as the moral and urgent need to protect them.

As examined in Chapter Six, children in conflict-affected areas navigate through intricate contexts where both armed and unarmed roles are performed. Furthermore, the legal and institutional frameworks under which these cases are registered and prosecuted is not clear. Since 2000, the Colombian Criminal Code has typified the recruitment of under-18 year-olds by armed groups in military or non-military activities related to the internal armed conflict as a crime. Despite this significant advance made in favour of children used by NSAGs in unarmed roles, there are still two ambiguities that place children who work for NSAGs in mining-and-conflict-affected areas in a legal limbo. Firstly, there is no precise definition of which unarmed roles could be considered as use and recruitment. Secondly, until February 2016 children used or recruited by the GDOs widely present in mining areas of Chocó, were legally considered as young transgressors rather than victims of the internal armed conflict. As such, they were not entitled to economic compensation, preferential entry to education and vocational programmes, or guarantees of non-recurrence.

Legal ambiguities and domestic scales of value concerning the worst forms of child labour challenge the rhetoric of urgency in all types of hazardous work.

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176 In 2016, the Constitutional court issued Sentence C-069/2016 establishing that regardless of the recognition of NSAGs as part of the Colombian armed conflict, children demobilised from those structures should be recognised as victims of armed conflict.
177 Grupo Delincuencial Organizado.
While legal frameworks, reports and scholars (Bourdillon, 2006, p.1214; Abebe and Bessell, 2011, p.777) refer to the worst forms of child labour as the ones always at the centre of attention of policymakers and media, in practice not all of those forms of work are equally prioritised or are part of the process of catastrophization. Based on the data I gathered during field research, it is possible to argue that two central elements contribute to the difficulties in grasping the complexities of the experiences of child workers in mining-and-conflict-affected areas as an urgent affair. One is the limitations in measuring the magnitude of the problem and, therefore, presenting it as objective reality or “objective catastrophization” (Ophir, 2010, p.59). The second element is the rigid top-down approach of the programmes aimed at child workers that make invisible those who do not meet the criteria. Both elements are analysed in the following subsections.

### 7.1.2 The construction of combined hazardous forms of labour as an objective reality

The process of catastrophization has an objective dimension. In this dimension, humans and nature (jointly or independently) cause visible aftermaths such as numerous deaths, shortages, destruction, widespread violence, worsening of health services and massive displacements (Ophir, 2010, p.63). These events, labelled by Ophir (2010, p.60) as “evils”, always have negative consequences for people’s lives, their world, and their future. Catastrophization takes places when these ‘evils’ “gradually rise in quantity, quality, frequency, span of distribution, and durability […] and the accompanying decline in the availability and effectiveness of means of protection, healing and restoration” (ibid., p.59). When these ‘evils’ are processed, classified, and prioritised in the discursive plane, the emergency appears as a legitimate and objective call to action.
Prioritising institutional response and aid towards children during protracted emergencies is beyond challenging. In Chocó, children are constantly exposed to a dreadful combination of ‘evils’ that makes it even harder for institutions and officials to decide which group of children are the most important and in urgent need of aid. Child labour in mines is only one of a myriad of hardship situations that children face in Chocó. Natural disasters, armed conflict, criminality, poverty, inequality, inadequate sanitary services, and difficulties in the provision and access to health and education are part of the complex landscape of vulnerabilities currently endured by children and their families (FISCH et al., 2018). In interview, an official from UNICEF, explained how children and adolescents in Chocó are continuously victimised: “Children experience one emergency after another without the adequate observance of their rights, which is coupled with the existence of weak governmental institutions, difficulties in reaching remote areas, as well as the presence and attacks of NSAGs”.178

The situation in mining-and-conflict-affected areas questions the way ‘evils’ around children are constructed and discursively presented. Although specific forms of child labour were catastrophized in the discursive plane, as examined in Section 7.1.1, some types of work (such as gold mining) were increasingly located in an inferior position of urgency. I argue here that the situation of child miners has been oversimplified. As mentioned in Chapter Two, only a vague figure of one million child miners worldwide (ILO, n.d) seems to account for this situation, which gives the impression that it is “large but not overwhelming” (ILO, 2005, p.7). The ‘evils’ that affect child miners during armed conflict are not differentiated in the figures from the experience of those that extract minerals in peaceful areas. As discussed in Chapter Six, the quality, quantity and frequency of the ‘evils’ around hazardous forms of work changed

178 Interview, with official UNICEF, Quibdó, 26 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
with the arrival of NSAGs to mining villages and the mechanisation of ASGM. The use of children and young people in hazardous forms of work became merged with the proliferation of mechanised mining sites, dramatic environmental and health aftermaths, the presence of NSAGs, and the violent disputes for resources and territory.

The only ‘evils’ that have been sources of objective catastrophization are the environmental and economic effects of illegal mining in conflict-areas, not the participation of children in hazardous forms of work in those settings. The extraction of minerals is only prosecuted if legal documentation and standards established by mineral authorities are not met, or if it causes uncontrolled environmental contamination. The situation is presented as an “unfolding disaster” (Ophir, 2010, p.65) that urgently needs to mitigate its effects. As mentioned in Chapter Three, according to the interviewed UNIMIL police officers, between 2011 and 2016, a total of 2,057 military operations were carried out by the unit. They calculate that each military operation against illegal mining costs the country around COP 6,000 million (£1,550,000).

Nonetheless, being concerned about the participation of NSAGs in illegal mining or the environmental effects of this practice is not the same as being worried about the involvement of young people in those activities. As one of the police officers from UNIMIL pointed out “from the thousands of military operations that we have carried out in the last five years, there are ten at most where it has been possible to have members of the Childhood and Adolescence Police Unit present”. This unit is the only one entitled to retrieve and protect children from mining areas or any other environment where they are at risk. The accounts that the police officers shared with me demonstrate that child

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179 As established in Article 338 of the Colombian Criminal Code (Law 599/2000)
180 As established in Article 333 of the Colombian Criminal Code (Law 599/2000)
181 Interview, police officers UNIMIL, Bogotá, 22 December 2017.
182 Ibid [Author’s translation].
labour in mechanised mining is a situation found by chance during the military operations intended to destroy machinery and supplies from unlicensed mining sites. The experiences of children and muchachos(as) working in illegal mechanised mines in conflict-affected areas under the control of NSAGs have not been openly recognised as an objective reality. Colombian authorities have seen the issue only through the lens of security and environmental protection, not through that of child protection.

Furthermore, statistics on the magnitude of hazardous forms of labour are grossly inadequate. For example, in 2012, the Ministry of Labour created the Integrated Information System for the Identification, Registration and Characterization of Child Labour and its worst forms (SIRITI) where local authorities in the 32 departments of Colombia are expected to register cases of child labour identifying its worst forms. Between 2012 and 2018, sixty-seven cases of children working in hazardous activities were recorded in Chocó (SIRITI, 2018). Of those cases, only one was registered as the participation in “activities of defence”, and no incidents for child labour in mining or quarrying were reported. Furthermore, the public reports do not allow indicating when a child performs various types of labour simultaneously, including those under the control of NSAGs. When involved in armed roles the cases of children recruited by NSAGs recognised as part of the internal armed conflict are registered on the official victims’ registry (RUV). When used or recruited by GDOs, the cases are usually recorded in the database of the System for Youth Criminal Responsibility.

Although the Colombian legal framework recognises non-violent tasks performed by children as a variant of recruitment, neither the RUV nor the

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183 Sistema de Información Integrado para la Identificación, Registro y Caracterización del Trabajo Infantil y sus peores formas.
184 Registro Único de Víctimas.
185 Subdirección de responsabilidad penal para adolescentes.
System for Youth Criminal Responsibility allow the identification of children recruited only in unarmed roles. Moreover, the fragmented nature of what is reported to each body is also problematic and does not reflect the real experience of children and youths in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, and the existing combination and interplay of hazardous forms of labour. Even though the database SIRITI allows officials to register all types of labour activities (hazardous or not) performed simultaneously as one case, according to the official in charge of this database, “in reality, officials only report the principal or more serious type of violation”.  

Therefore, officials subjectively decide which situation is more serious or could be considered as “the principal” type. These findings support academic studies that highlight the limitations and fallibility of decision-making abilities of child protection workers, due to the existence of a disjunction between those who design assessment tools and reports instruments, and the local realities of practitioners (Munro, 1999; Gillingham and Humphreys, 2010, p.2598). According to the same official, the underreporting of hazardous forms of labour can also be explained due to lack of awareness of the existence of reporting mechanisms in remote municipalities, different cultural beliefs, institutional tensions, or feelings of fear felt by officials, working children and their families.

When I asked what she referred to as “institutional tensions”, the SIRITI official explained that the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF)\textsuperscript{187}, which is the central governmental institution in charge of policies regarding childhood, wants to eliminate the section entitled “violent actions” (e.g., child recruitment, sexual exploitation, drug trafficking, forced displacement) from the report format – thus removing the ability to report on the combination of various forms of exploitative work. As she asserted, the elimination of the “violent

\textsuperscript{186} Informal conversation with official in Ministry of Labour, Bogota, 19 November 2016 [Author’s translation].

\textsuperscript{187} Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar.
“actions” section would “reduce the institutional responsibility of the ICBF to protect those children when different types of child labour are interconnected”¹⁸⁸, and it would also scale down, even more, the visibility of the actual situations faced by children.

When ICBF officials in charge of protecting children involved in hazardous forms of work were asked about the procedures followed in situations where several of this forms of child labour are combined, they repeatedly claimed that they do not know a single case where two situations exist in parallel.¹⁸⁹ According to them, there are no standardised procedures, and the information is confidential on the grounds that these cases require a case-by-case approach. In brief, there are no specific protocols to report and attend to cases where children perform only non-violent roles for NSAGs or various forms of dangerous and illicit work are combined. Between 2014 and March 2017, the ICBF Rights Restoration programme only reported one case of child labour in Chocó (ICBF, 2017, p.19). This finding demonstrates that despite the construction of child labour as a “moral category” in child protection discourse (Bourdillon, 2006, p.1203), the lived experiences of working children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas do not exist as measurable, objective or overwhelming realities for State organisations at the national level. This invisibility is reinforced by the humanitarian and development programming in place aiming to reach children affected by the worst forms of child labour, as analysed in the next section.

¹⁸⁸ Informal conversation with Ministry of Labour, Bogota, 19 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
¹⁸⁹ Group Interview with officials ICBF, Bogotá, 17 May 2017.
7.1.3 Institutional invisibility of working children that do not meet the criteria

The recognition of children as victims in mining-and-conflict-affected areas varies depending on the roles performed and the perception of their situation. As argued by Höijer (2004, p.516), the discourse of compassion is a cultural-cognitive construction, and as such, some children are identified as “better victims than others”. Depending on tasks performed and the NSAGs to which children are associated, national authorities label them as *young transgressors* in the case of criminal organisations; as *victims or combatants* in the case of recognised NSAGs; or *barequeros(as)* if they are perceived only as mining labourers.

Interviews with representatives from various institutions and agencies made evident the existence of the division between children and the hierarchies put in place. According to one of the officials in charge of the Attention Program for children disengaged from armed actors of the ICBF:

> What kids do [roles performed] defines what happens next with the assistance process. A child working directly in the extraction of gold in a mine controlled by a faction of a BACRIM [criminal band] is not the same as one in the same territory who is an armed actor [NSAGs], takes care of this mining area, has been indoctrinated, manages weapons, and is being used for military actions.\(^\text{190}\)

The data I collected in mining-and-conflict-affected-areas supports this view. The experience of young miners is seen by locals as different depending on the armed actor that controls the ore extraction. Nonetheless, the official’s account implicitly considers one situation as worse than the other. For her, being politically indoctrinated and performing armed roles is perceived as a more urgent and compelling reason for responding than just working as a miner in an area controlled by criminals.

\(^{190}\) Ibid [Author’s translation].
The official in charge of dangerous forms of child labour of the same State organisation shared this perception. During her interview, she recalled the constant requests that the ICBF has made to ILO to exclude child recruitment from the category of ‘the worst forms of child labour’. Child recruitment is considered by the Colombian legislation as a crime and, as such, more serious than dangerous forms of work:

Recruitment is more serious because we say that mining correlates a lot with subsistence activities and so on. But with recruitment, there are multiple configurations of violations and crimes according to the criminal code that requires a firmer action by the State and a particular recognition of the seriousness of the act.\(^{191}\)

These statements shared with me by the officials in charge of child miners and child combatants demonstrate the existing scales of value and boundaries to qualify some groups of children as victims worthy of urgent intervention. These findings are in agreement with Höijer’s study (2004, p.528) on audience’s reactions to media reports of human suffering, which showed that “there are different forms of compassion as well as different forms of indifference”. Although child miners are not entirely ignored by institutions, the fact that working in mines is not considered a crime in the national legislation place them at a lower level of institutional action.

The institutional approach to hazardous forms of labour is characterised by a rigid, centralised and top-down approach that does not reach the most vulnerable children in Chocó and makes them invisible. Similarly to other countries, the institutional approach in Colombia to child labour has mostly been “a cosmetic effort to deal with the issue” (Khan, 2010, p.108). Policies are designed at national level and, while implementation is decentralised in the 32 departments of the country, each department and municipality is under the

\(^{191}\) Ibid [Author’s translation].
legal obligation to include the programmes and actions approved at the national level within their local policy plans (Planes de Desarrollo). While it is also expected that municipal authorities adjust implementation to their local realities, this is not always the case. Although the regional policy plan of Chocó (2016-2019) explicitly mentions the aim to eradicate the worst forms of child labour by 2026 (Asamblea Departamental del Chocó, 2016, p.193), paradoxically, mining-and-conflict-affected areas are not prioritised.

Interviewed officials in charge of preventing and attending cases of child labour, from the ICBF in Bogotá, departmental authorities in Chocó, and the Ministry of Labour, admitted that they never visit mining areas due to the presence of NSAGs. Even though the Ministry of Labour office has jurisdiction in mining areas, activities to reduce child labour made by this institution are mainly concentrated in the urban areas of Quibdó.

Child recruitment for armed conflict has also overshadowed the institutional response of international agencies to fight child labour in mines. As Wells (2013) contends, INGOs play a central role in the discursive construction of conflict-affected societies through their “representations of the causes of conflict, their impact on children and their framing of a response to children’s suffering” (p.246). For example, UNICEF, as the UN agency specifically focused on the protection of children, does not have a specific line of action in Chocó towards working children in gold mines. The programmes implemented in mining areas, such as Retorno a la Alegría, do not aim to tackle child labour in mines. The institutional efforts of UNICEF are concentrated on providing

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194 Interview with official from the Departmental Secretariat of Social Integration in Chocó, Quibdó, 23 November 2016.
195 Interview, officials Ministry of Labour, Quibdó, 22 December 2016.
196 Such as Alto Baudó, Atrato, Bagadó, Lloró, Medio Atrato, Quibdó, and Río Quito.
197 Such as Novita, Condoto and Medio San Juan.
198 Return to Joy.
psychological support and education to children affected by natural disasters, as well as to prevent their recruitment by NSAGs (UNICEF, 2009). According to the UNICEF official interviewed, the absence of specific actions by UNICEF directed towards child miners is explained by the fact that “it is not an area of work at the national level”. This demonstrates that despite the catastrophization of hazardous forms of work in the discursive plane, in practice, if the national office of UNICEF in Bogota does not regard child labour in mining-and-conflict-affected areas as an urgent issue, local officials are unable to direct actions of protection towards this group of children.

Likewise, since 2014, the NGO, War Child, is implementing with three co-parties a five-year programme called Con Paz Aprendemos Más. The programme is in eight municipalities of Chocó including six mining-and-conflict-affected municipalities. Its aims are to improve the academic achievement of children already enrolled in public schools, as well as to provide information and training for them and their parents on children rights, self-protection and life skills (Mercy Corps, 2014). Although, during an interview, one of the local officials in charge acknowledged the existence of child labour in mines as an existing situation in the implementing areas, it was not identified as the primary targeted issue. Moreover, the separation between different categories and status of children was echoed when recalling his previous working experience with “children who were actual victims”. For him, “actual victims” refers to the children of missing people and abductees. Meanwhile, although the situation of children working in gold mining, as well as those sexually exploited in mining towns, was recognised for him as “worrying”, no cases have been reported to the authorities.

199 Interview, official UNICEF, Quibdó, 26 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
200 The Corporación Opción Legal, Mercy Corps, and Corporación Infancia y Desarrollo.
201 With peace we learn more.
202 Atrato*, Bojayá, Condoto*, Its mina*, Loró, Quibdó, Rió Quito* and Tadó* (*mining areas).
203 Interview, official at War Child, Quibdó, 10 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
The failure to acknowledge the combination of various forms of child labour leads to the disregarding of the existence of children whose performed roles do not conform to the labels of ‘only miners’ or ‘only combatants’, as discussed in Chapter Six. Those children who are under the control of NSAGs and other illicit actors in the midst of resource-fuelled conflicts are not deemed as victims of child recruitment for armed conflict, nor are they officially recognised for all the activities they undertake around mining. Furthermore, it is not clear which institutional approach could be applied to them. The existent sub-categorisation of the ‘worst forms of child labour’ makes it challenging to articulate programmes and guidelines that allow for these nuances. For example, the ICBF standard procedure to attend to child miners prioritises children’s need to remain with their families (ICBF, 2016a, p.29), whereas programmes for children involved in armed roles with NSAGs usually put minors in temporary institutions, and family reunion takes place at the end of the reintegration process (ICBF, 2016b, p.18). When children recruited by NSAGs meet the criteria, they can start their demobilisation process during which they are expected to receive certification from the Operative Committee for the Abandonment of Arms (CODA). This committee is in charge of determining and verifying if a child or an adult is effectively part of NSAGs. If the complexity of the children’s roles is not acknowledged as part of the functioning of NSAGs, there is a risk of continuing to deny access to humanitarian aid, as well as economic, legal and social incentives to many children amid natural resource conflicts.

In practice, the recognition of children navigating mining-and-conflict-affected areas is put under legal niceties which make it even harder for children to meet

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204 Comité Operativo para la Dejación de Armas. This committee is made up of delegates of the Ministry of justice, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, Attorney General of Colombia, and the National Ombudsman Office.
the criteria of institutions to be recognised as victims or at least as subjects of urgent action. When government officials of the Intersectoral Commission to Prevent the Use, Recruitment, and Sexual Violence of Children (CIPRUNNA)\textsuperscript{205} were asked during an interview if the involvement of a child in mining under the control of armed groups could be considered as a variant of recruitment, they stated that it is essential to differentiate between “linking” and “recruiting”.\textsuperscript{206} In those “hypothetical cases”, as one of the interviewed officials referred to this situation, it is considered important to determine not only if the armed group has been recognised as part of the armed conflict, “to classify a child as a victim of child recruitment for war, it is also necessary to prove that the gold extracted and the revenues made by children are directly related to the functioning of the armed group in the frame of the armed conflict”.\textsuperscript{207} Otherwise, that action should be treated as a mere ‘linkage’ with armed groups, and the institutional response in place is the one which deals with the juvenile criminal responsibility.

The findings in the first part of this chapter illustrate how the discursive elements of catastrophization are not static (Ophir, 2010, p.74). Although State and intervention agencies have used children discursively as icons of vulnerability and regard hazardous forms of labour as terrible situations that deserve urgent and priority action, they do not equally prioritise all groups of child workers. In conflict-affected areas where various hazardous forms of work are combined, children who navigate and perform illegal and dangerous forms of labour are not acknowledged as objective realities. Therefore, only those who hold armed positions are politically constructed as worthy of urgent protection. Even though illegal mining is now considered to be an unfolding

\textsuperscript{205} Comisión Intersectorial para la Prevención del Reclutamiento, la Utilización y la Violencia Sexual contra Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes por grupos armados al margen de la ley y por grupos delictivos organizados.

\textsuperscript{206} Interview, official CIPRUNNA, Bogota, 26 May 2017 [Author’s translation].

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid. [Author’s translation].
catastrophe, due to the environmental damage caused and the participation of
NSAGs, working children in this economic activity are not subject to priority
action. As Ophir (2010, p.74) argues, emergencies are no longer “restricted to
the realm of law”. Beyond legal frameworks, non-governmental actors are also
key players in the process of catastrophization. In the next section of the
chapter, I complement Ophir’s theoretical postulates by giving more emphasis
to the ‘emotion-based impulses’ (Suski, 2009) that inform officials’ actions to
mitigate catastrophes at the micro level.

7.2 Emotions, images and positionality of officials as drivers of
action

As demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, the conceptualisation of the
‘most vulnerable children’ is ambiguous as in practice the children
encompassed in that category are not proportionately protected. The theoretical
approach to disasters proposed by Ophir (2010) facilitated the analysis of the
discursive and objective planes that catastrophize the situation of some group
of children over others. However, the data I collected in the research areas also
reveals that emotions, values, and the background of local officials in charge of
child protection play a central role for action. Using the notion of ‘emotion-
based impulse’ as an approximation to humanitarianism as proposed by Suski
(2009) helps to analyse humanitarian actions based on the social constructions
of those in need. As discussed in Chapter Two, the emotional impulse of
humanitarian interventions is always reliant on “the worthiness of those
suffering, and constructions of the morality of sufferers shifts in different
historical and social contexts” (Suski, 2009, p.210). Therefore, the construction
or absence of an emotional impulse for action reflects the institutional
commitment to child labourers in hazardous conditions as the so-called ‘most
vulnerable’.
The theoretical postulates of Suski (2009, p.211) highlight emotions and images as central elements that significantly influence the way observers construct and sentimentalise disadvantaged children. Thus, the reaction to a child’s plight is associated with the representation of the specific situation of the child, as well as the relationship of the observer with childhood more broadly (Suski, 2009, p.207). This means that the action or inaction regarding children is greatly informed by our positionality and personal experiences as children and with children. Therefore, humanitarian ‘clients’ are not always constructed in absolute compliance with legal frameworks or the human rights discourse which creates ambivalence in humanitarian and development interventions. Suski’s approximation to humanitarian action concerning disadvantaged children is in line with studies carried out on the role of emotions and visual communication in the politics of solidarity (Höijer, 2004; Orgad, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2010 and 2013). Nonetheless, those studies conceive the relationship between humanitarian witnesses and vulnerable populations within the ‘us-them’ relationship. My study found that in the case of a protracted conflict, officials are not necessarily outsiders from the disadvantaged population. Thus, the division between them, as mining communities and us, as officials or humanitarian workers is not always clear.

Officials from State organisations, INGOs and NGOs are key actors that mould the situation and childhood experiences of working children. Thus, NGOs and international organisations working on child protection in Chocó complement the action of local authorities regarding the provision of services and also shape political discourses and programming. Therefore, examining the accounts and childhood representations of the organisations and officials that granted me access during the field research helps to explain why some children are more sentimentalised than others. Although it is not possible to make generalisations based on published reports and interviews, it is possible to identify discursive
strands that are presented as justification for action and inaction towards children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. As Heyse (2006, p.18) argues, it is not possible to approach NGOs as a coherent and unified group; there are political and practical differences in their approach depending on the context. Drawing on Suski (2009), in the following subsections, I analyse the emotion-based impulses of officials towards the situation of children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, their representation of child workers, and their positionality.

7.2.1  Local officials and their feelings of concern, fear and frustration

Just as scholars bring a specific array of values, personal perspectives and feelings to their encounters with children during research (Greene and Hill, 2005, p.8), the stance and subjectivity of officials inform the way in which child protection policies are implemented. As Laqua (2014, p.183) argues “the adoption of humanitarian rhetoric often tells us more about the individuals who promoted a cause than those who were the targets of their concern”. Officials in charge of the protection of children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas do not have a shared understanding of how to approach minors and their families who transit between different activities ranging from artisanal mining and associated informal activities to illegal and criminal actions. Therefore, the interpretation of the best course of action is hugely informed by subjective interpretations, feelings, background experiences and proximity to those children and families.

During the field work, professionals working in various agencies referred to feelings of concern for the situation of children. Interviewed officers from War Child208 and UNICEF209 stressed their worry about the use of children in

208 Interview, Official War Child, Quibdó, 10 May 2017.
209 Interview, official UNICEF, Quibdó, 26 December 2016
combined hazardous forms of work and exploitation in mining areas. Officials at the Ombudsman office in Chocó echoed those sentiments by mentioning how affecting they find the use and recruitment of children by criminal organisations and NSAGs in urban and rural areas including mining villages. Likewise, interviewed scholars acknowledged with distress the involvement of children around the gold supply chain and the difficulties of accountability of illegal miners. Indeed, various officials, especially those in Bogotá, have been calling for heightened awareness of the situation of children used by NSAGs especially in non-military functions. Nonetheless, concern has not been enough for action.

Distress at security conditions and fear were the predominant emotions conveyed by the interviewed officials when discussing institutional interventions in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Interestingly, officers from local environmental authorities, the regional and national Comptroller Office and the Ombudsman office in Chocó were especially reluctant to openly talk about illegal mining or being recorded during interviews due to possible problems of personal security. In the same way, as mentioned in Section 7.1.3, officials from the Ministry of Labour admitted that, despite their mandate, they never visit mining areas and their intervention in urban areas is limited especially regarding hazardous forms of work considered as illicit (e.g., sexual exploitation, micro-drug trafficking, and child recruitment). As one of the officials in the regional office of the Ministry of Labour asserted during an interview, fear and lack of protection for officials are the main constraints on providing protection for child workers:

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210 Interview, researcher, Fundación Ideas para la Paz, Bogotá, 1 November 2016.
211 Interview, various officials, CIPRUNNA, Bogotá, 26 May 2017.
212 Interview, officials from the Departmental Secretary for Economic Development and Natural Resources in Chocó, Quibdó, 29 November 2016.
213 Interview, official, the National Comptroller office, Chocó headquarter, Quibdó, 22 November 2016.
214 Interview, official, Children, Youth and Senior Adults office, Quibdó, 12 December 2016.
We, as the Ministry of Labour, do not directly go to danger zones. We do not even go to the safe areas due to lack of resources, much less to those [conflict-affected areas] due to both the lack of resources and the dangerous conditions. In other words, it is public knowledge that those mining sites are involved in the armed conflict with armed groups, so it is a very dangerous issue.215

Indeed, direct messages to prevent the involvement of children with NSAGs are not possible due to the control exerted by those groups on the territory. The personal security of officials is always at risk, and the mechanisms of protection offered by the State are minimal or, in most cases, non-existent. As one local family judicial procurator stated during an informal conversation: “if the criminal bands have no problem killing teenagers, they have much less problem killing us as officials!”216 According to him, during judicial processes, young people seldom offer a defence, preferring to accept formal accusations of crimes. He estimates that “98% of them [young transgressors] never mention the name of the armed group they are working for. Likewise, defence attorneys do not inquire about details related to the roles performed, nor the nexus or modus operandi of those groups - due to their fear of being threatened or killed”.217 These accounts demonstrate both the vulnerability of adolescents and officers to the actions of armed groups, as well as the role of the emotion of fear as an action conditioner.

Their own perceptions of insecurity and fear were also recognised by most of the participants of this study as being a particular issue when working with young people. Youths in Chocó are the target of violence, crime and illicit economies (Colombia Plural, 2016).218 During the time I conducted fieldwork (October 2016 to June 2017), two night-curfews in Quibdó were established

215 Interview, Official Ministry of Labour, Quibdó, 11 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
216 Informal conversation, Quibdó, 29 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
217 Ibid [Author’s translation].
218 During 2016 the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences reported 181 homicides in Chocó, of which 124 were committed in Quibdó. Twenty-three of the victims were under the age of 18 and forty-four below the age of 24 (INML, 2016).
through threatening pamphlets distributed by Gaitanista Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC)\textsuperscript{219}, the biggest GDO operating in Chocó. In the pamphlets, AGC claimed that curfews and social cleansing were established in order to maintain social order from disorganised youths described as “misfits and dangerous young people who only dedicate themselves to stealing, robbing and killing good people [Author’s translation]” (See Appendix 9). In this context, fear and silences are powerful inhibitors of child protection actions and determinants of the representation of children.

Interviewees mentioned frustration as another permanent feeling they experienced when facing the lack of political will and financial support. During a conference on childhood and peacebuilding held in Bogotá in 2016, the Colombian scholar, María Torrado, asserted that “it seems that children’s rights are only protected from Monday to Friday, from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm”.\textsuperscript{220} In this statement, Torrado referred to the restricted timing of interventions from governmental institutions and the lack of will to attend cases of children at risk out of working days. However, in Chocó, the lack of political will is also reflected during normal working hours. The director of the Departmental Secretariat of Social Integration in Chocó explained her feelings of frustration and tiredness in interview: “…one reaches a point when one gets tired because nobody attends meetings, they do not even delegate, everyone turns their back on the problem of child labour”.\textsuperscript{221} To tackle the situation in Chocó, the Ministry of Labour created 27 Inter-institutional Committees for the Prevention and Eradication of Child Labour (CIETIs)\textsuperscript{222} to which local authorities are summoned. However, recurrent widespread absence at meetings, lack of

\textsuperscript{219} Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia.

\textsuperscript{220} Torrado’s presentation took place at the Colloquium on Childhood and adolescence in the Havana Agreement: challenges and opportunities held at the National University of Colombia on 19 October 2016.

\textsuperscript{221} Interview, Quibdó, 23 November 2016 [Author’s translation].

\textsuperscript{222} Comité Interinstitucional para la. Prevención y Erradicación del Trabajo Infantil.
articulation between agencies and low funding were highlighted as the main challenges to eradicating the ‘worst forms of child labour’. The UNICEF representative in Chocó mentioned the constant lobbying they have to do to set and maintain children’s issues in the political agenda of the municipalities.

One of these initiatives is called *Municipalities as children’s friends*; this aims to heighten awareness of children’s institutional needs and overcome the difficulties of the recurrent changes of personnel in governmental institutions.

Interviewees also linked their sentiments of frustration with the inadequacy of the approach of some of the programmes to tackle hazardous forms of work. One of the officials from the Ministry of Labour in Bogotá asserted her dissatisfaction by saying: “the problem is that child labour is not a crime. Even if I, as an official or normal person, see a child working on the street, I cannot do anything! There must be a formal report since a family lawyer is the one entitled to restore children’s rights”.

Her indignation shows how her feelings as an officer and as individual come together when facing existent bureaucratic restrictions on actions to protect children.

Similarly, one of the interviewed leaders and officials from the Diocese of Quibdó recalled one experience working with local authorities in the prevention of the involvement of children in NSAGs. He remembered that throwing publicity out of a helicopter, organising concerts and football tournaments was useless. These short-term activities were not enough to help children who had been economically dependent on the profits made through extortion and homicide in the service of NSAGs. For him, “it would have been better to save at least twenty youths than none of them. However, we could not save them, we were not able to provide what they needed, we did not have

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223 Interview, Quibdó, 25 November 2016.
224 Interview, Quibdó, December 16 2016.
225 *Municipios amigos de la infancia*.
226 Informal conversation, Bogotá, 19 October 2016 [Author’s translation].
enough resources, it was so frustrating”. In the next subsection, I elaborate on these findings by examining this idea of ‘saving children’ at risk which is simultaneously coupled with representations of some youngsters as ‘lost causes’.

### 7.2.2 Representation of children as either ‘the salvageable’ or ‘the lost causes’

The premise ‘it is better to prevent than to eradicate’, has been the mantra of governmental institutions and agencies in Colombia in their approach to child labour, especially in its hazardous forms. This approach aligns with the literature about juvenile delinquency which also stresses early intervention as the best means to reduce the involvement of children in crime (e.g. Zigler, Taussig, and Black, 1992; Osher et al., 2003; Hemphill, Heerde, and Scholes-Balog, 2016). As the head of the Departmental Secretariat of Social Integration in Chocó recalled, “here everything is, above all, preventive. I do not remember that there have been sanctions in Chocó on exploitation and child labour”. In the accounts of many of the interviewed officials, prevention activities (i.e., concerts, workshops, T-shirt distribution, talks, or football tournaments) are tightly connected with the notion of rescuing children.

In their accounts, the conception of ‘saving’ was used in two ways: On the one hand, to refer to the early stage of prevention when children at risk have not yet been involved in dangerous or illegal activities. In those cases, it is still possible to “snatch them from the hands of violence”. On the other hand, it is used to refer to actions aiming to retrieve children already involved in the worst forms of child labour. Such actions to retrieve children from gold mining have taken

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227 Interview, 9 March 2017 [Author’s translation].
228 Interview, Quibdó, 5 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
229 Ibid [Author’s translation].
place sporadically during military operations lead by UNIMIL. As mentioned in Section 7.1.2, underage miners can only be retrieved when members of the Childhood and Adolescence Police Unit accompany military operations. However, the possibilities of retrieval during those operations are minimal since this unit hardly ever accompanied UNIMIL. Even though members of UNIMIL asserted that they had witnessed the presence of underage workers at non-legalised mining sites, they cannot retrieve them as they are not legally invested with the authority to do so. Likewise, this situation has also contributed to justify the ineffectiveness of the ICBF; for instance, interviewed officials argued that “the one that must 'rescue' the children is the Children's Police, not the ICBF”.

Children who cannot be rescued, including those embedded in criminality and gold mining, are depicted by institutions as ‘lost causes’. They are placed in a metaphorical field where nothing can be done as it is too late to reverse their situation as criminals or workers. The representation of them as victims is substituted by the idea of subjects whose salvation is unattainable due to their proximity to armed actors or money. As stated by the Family Commissioner of Medio Atrato, children can be compared with trees: “when they are small you can dominate the branches, but when they grow nobody can dominate them”. In line with this perspective, the official from the Departmental Secretariat of Social Integration in Chocó explained that “if there are no such options [leisure activities] they [children] go ‘to the other side’, next to evil, and this is what is happening – and rescuing them is very difficult”. This frustration was shared by one of the officials interviewed from the Ombudsman

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230 Interview with police officers UNIMIL, Bogotá, 22 December 2016.
231 Group Interview, officials ICBF, Bogotá, 17 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
232 Family commissioners are lawyers appointed by local mayors to provide support and protection to children and resolve family-related issues. These officials are present in areas where the ICBF do not have delegates.
233 Interview, Quibdó, 12 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
234 Interview, Quibdó, 23 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
office of Chocó who recalled how, during a meeting, local leaders of Quibdó questioned the status of victims of some children by saying: “they kill at the age of 13, so who are the victims?”

Questioning to what extent children involved in hazardous forms of work are victims or not, demonstrates how officials relativized the construction of children as vulnerable subjects. ‘Lost cause’ children are not seen as vulnerable and so are invisible or not included in the institutional responses. These findings support the conception of the “bystander effect” suggested by Chouliaraki (2010) which refers to “people’s indifference to acting on suffering as a reaction towards negative emotion that ultimately leaves people feeling powerless” (p.112). Although Chouliaraki’s study paid special attention to the politics of pity through the analysis of humanitarian communication, it helps to understand the power of images and emotions in the reaction of officials towards children’s adversity. In the areas where I conducted field research, as previously noted by Chouliaraki (2010, p.112), officials had the sense that the situation of children involved in hazardous forms of work is hopeless, that it is not possible to even reflect about it. Officials become bystanders of the situation of child workers and their lack of action is greatly informed by feelings and emotions, as discussed in Section 7.2.1, but also by their perception of some children as ‘the salvageable’ and others as ‘the lost causes’. The next section examines how the positionality of the officials largely informs the provision or denial of aid.

### 7.2.3 The positionality of officials and the protection of child workers

Another key factor in the way officials categorise children in need depends on the background of officials, their feelings, personal childhood stories and proximity to the reality of mining communities. These factors play pivotal roles

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235 Interview, official 3, Ombudsman office, Quibdó, 30 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
in the way that children are perceived, and in the actions directed to protect them from hazardous forms of work. As Suski (2009, p.210) argues “when adults help children, we are in negotiation with our own childhood, and the line between self and other is blurred, as it is the distinction between altruism and self-interest”. This negotiation with childhood is particularly present in the areas I conducted this study since some of the interviewed officers were born in mining areas.

Thus, some governmental and NGO officials born in mining towns recalled with pride, during the interviews, their childhood experiences as child workers. For them, mining was a crucial part of their process of interaction with other children and their families, as the official from the Departmental Secretary for Economic Development and Natural Resources asserted: “I can say that I used to go to the mine not so much to learn to mine but because an extension of my home was there. It [the mine] had a symbolic meaning, it was a living environment”. Other officials explained that despite their involvement in mining during their childhood, it did not interfere with their education or development as children. They were later able to attend higher education and find jobs in other economic sectors, as the administrative subdirectory of the Institute of Environmental Research of the Pacific (IIAP) recalled:

I am from Condoto, I studied and lived part of my childhood and my primary and secondary school process in a neighbourhood of mining families. My parents were teachers, and most of my classmates were miners, from mining families. They [children] used to go to the mines and participated in the mining work. None of my classmates was lost or dropped out of school; they [child miners] were even a source of pride for us [...] some of those classmates work today at the Banco de la República here. Others are teachers in Medellin, good! None of them ended up doing bad things.

236 Interview, Quibdó, 29 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
237 Instituto de Investigación Ambiental del Pacífico.
238 Interview, Quibdó, 17 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
The blurred division between altruism and self-interest mentioned by Suski (2009, p.210) when helping children is especially evident in the cases where officials from local authorities are also involved in unlicensed mining. During the visits I did to mining-and-conflict-affected villages, I had the opportunity to interact with officials from local authorities who were in charge of restricting the access of supplies to mining sites, protecting children and their families, as well as dealing with issues regarding security and justice administration. However, since some of these officials were also mining entrepreneurs, owners of machinery, or investors, their double role as officials and miners put them in a grey area where they are part of the problem of unlicensed mining. As mentioned in Chapter Five, some mining entrepreneurs have capitalised on the social value of small children in mining villages to have good relationships with local communities and access to land with ore deposits. The construction of facilities such as schools and day care centres, as well as the provision of school supplies and gifts, are made by those officials who are also mining entrepreneurs. In these cases, the line between altruism and self-interest is obscure.

Thus, local officials with close links with mining villages and unlicensed-mining sites do not always problematize child labour. During informal conversations held during some of my visits to mining villages, they were proud of their success stories as ex-child miners who later became locally well-known mining entrepreneurs. These officials considered themselves as “employers and helpers of mining communities through their work as local authorities”. The fact that some local authorities in charge of tackling illegal mining and protecting children are also investors in those mines shows the importance of including the positionality of the officials when analysing actions to protect children from this hazardous form of work. Likewise, the experience

239 Informal conversations held with local authorities during a pilot visit to Bebarama on 21 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
of local officials as child miners makes them normalise what happens in regard to this issue. This normalisation continues today although this type of work is not the same due to the mechanisation of ASGM and the involvement of NSAGs and illicit actors, as examined in Chapter Six.

Child labour in mining is locally considered by some officials as a tolerable affair and justified on the grounds that it is not work. It is ‘just’ collaboration in an artisanal practice. As one former local consultant with a UN agency answered when asked about the presence of children in mining sites:

The only thing that children do is playing or accompanying their mothers to the barequeo [ASGM]. In other cases, their parents take them to the woods [...] there are some children that attend mines only to see when their parents are going to barequear, they go only to accompany them, so they are not left alone at home. There are others that, let’s say, get the habit of barequeo or learn to work in the mine and do work but let’s say that is a very low percentage.240

This conception of children in mines is attuned with the local perceptions regarding work and childhood, as I examined in Chapter Five. Thus, it was recurrent during the interviews that local officials asked me to clarify what I meant when referring to the ‘worst forms of child labour’ and why mining is considered exploitative. Similarly to this local consultant, various officials mentioned that during their visits to rural areas they occasionally see minors working in mining but, “it is just barequeo it is not mechanised mining”.241 The discursive representation of child labour as occasional and tolerable when carried out in ASGM could be explained in part by the fact that the officials who had childhood experiences as miners did so before the arrival of large-scale mechanisation and NSAGs. However, all of them were also aware of the widespread destruction of ASGM sites, and the adverse effects it has had on mining communities.

240 Interview with local ex-consultant UN Human Rights, Quibdó, 13 January 2017 [Author’s translation].
241 Interview with official from the Ombudsman office, Quibdó, 29 November 2016 [Author’s translation].
By representing child labour in mining-and-conflict-affected areas only as artisanal, the current participation of young people in mechanised forms of mining is overlooked. Similarly, this representation of child labour in mines normalises the involvement of children in this unlicensed industry which has been merged with various forms of illegality and criminality as explained in Chapter Six. The absence of institutional initiatives that tackle child labour in mining practices labelled as traditional or barequeo is justified on the grounds that it is acceptable and normal. As one of the psychologists of the Unión Panamericana mayor’s office explained to me: “For us, mining is perceived as something normal, as the main work activity. It has risks as any other job and children grow up seeing it as normal”.

Furthermore, the lack of a shared understanding of the existing child protection policies and what hazardous forms of labour involve, greatly influence the action taking concerning children in mining-an-conflict-affected areas. When I interviewed the Family Commissioner of Medio Atrato, he admitted that he only referred cases of child abuse to the ICBF when they are “truly serious”. Child labour in mines is not within this perception of seriousness. In the few cases relating to hazardous forms of child labour that have been attended by the ICBF in Chocó, a family lawyer is the only representative entitled to decide the best route to follow to protect children’s rights in each situation. Although the national legislation is the main driver of their decisions it does not necessarily mean that feelings, emotions and subjective perceptions of suffering do not influence these lawyers’ decisions.

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242 Interview, Unión Panamericana, 15 December 2016 [Author’s translation].
243 Family commissioners are in charge of preventing, guarantying and restoring the rights of children, adolescents and other members of the family when they are victims of domestic violence and crimes including forced labour or sexual exploitation.
244 Interview, Quibdó, 12 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
Before the current Family Commissioner of Medio Atrato occupied this position, he was also part, for more than twenty years, of one of the biggest community councils in Chocó called the Community Council of the Integral Peasant Association of Atrato (COCOMACIA)245 whose jurisdiction covers mining areas. Despite legal frameworks, his profession as a lawyer, and experience as a local authority, his perception of hazardous situations for children is greatly informed by his social construction of age as part of mining communities:

When I was in COCOMACIA, we had to draw up a mining regulation because when we went to the mines, we found that the right to education of children was violated. Children under fourteen, ten or eleven years of age were already in the mines carrying ACPM gallons [diesel fuel], carrying a toolbox or food. We also know that the code for Children and Adolescents 1098/2006 does not allow children to be given a job that is inappropriate for them. Then we saw that it was a disaster in our communities because we went on a weekday, a Monday or a Tuesday and we found the schools empty with two or three students. When we asked the teachers what happened, they told us children were in the mines. We prevent children under the age of 14 from going to the mine. [...] We understand that there are some jobs in our communities that from 14 to 18 can be done by a child.246

Thus, he only considers child labour as an urgent situation if it is performed under the age of fourteen.

These accounts demonstrate how subjective considerations, previous experiences, positionality, and the representation of children inform and determine decision-making in child protection in the field. Drawing on the ideas of Suski (2009, p.210), it is apparent that the rhetoric of child protection is selectively applied according to the intervener’s constructions of children and their suffering. This study found that, as well as the inherent bias in risk assessment regarding child protection, the process of decision-making is also conditioned by the official’s proximity and familiarity to the issue of unlicensed

245 Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato.
246 Interview, Quibdó, 12 May 2017 [Author’s translation].
mining. This closeness led them to regard some hazardous forms of work as less urgent than others. Moreover, since child protection workers are not always outsiders from mining-and-conflict-affected areas, the separation between beneficiaries and child protection practitioners is unclear and their perception of child labour in mines is normalised. Instead of taking for granted that the voices of officials are a carbon copy of the organisation’s vision and action, my study shows that local officials have leeway as to how they implement child protection policies in mining-and-conflict-affected areas – or neglect to do so.

7.3 Conclusions

This chapter discussed the political construction of the sense of urgency to protect disadvantaged children involved in hazardous forms of work. It demonstrated how children involved in various roles and capacities in mining-and-conflict-affected areas have been analytically and institutionally segregated. Using the concept of catastrophization (Ophir, 2010), the analysis of the institutional response to children in the field study areas demonstrates that despite the discursive construction of hazardous forms of work as urgent, in practice, child miners are in the bottom line of priorities for institutions. Moreover, children who perform multiple roles are not even recognised. Thus, there are contradictions and hierarchies of suffering and value within the category of the ‘most vulnerable children’ that challenge child-protection frames.

Through the analysis of the objective and discursive planes of the production of humanitarian and development appeals, this chapter shows that despite the use of children as an icon in the discourse of global compassion, not all groups of disadvantaged children have the same humanitarian value. The hierarchies of
value are rooted in what Laqua (2014, p.177) calls “discursive formations”, that is, the politics behind reports, speeches, and campaigns in the creation of humanitarian appeals. In particular, this chapter demonstrates how beyond insufficient financial resources for implementation and lack of articulation between institutions at the national and local level, children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas are mostly neglected because they are not perceived as worth urgent intervention. This is explained in part by the creation of the double standard of urgency towards the most vulnerable children, which is sustained and informed by the feelings, emotions and positionality of officials.

The possibilities of protection and survival of child workers in hazardous forms of work depend on their recognition as victims or salvageable subjects. Understanding how child labourers in mining-and-conflict-affected areas are recognised – or fail to be recognised – from the perspective of those aiming to protect children is central to explaining why some disadvantaged children are seen as more worthy victims than others. The empirical data I gathered during the fieldwork indicates that the possibilities of protection are higher if children are involved in illicit forms of work, if their situation is seen as an objective and urgent reality, or if they can be retrieved through military operations or preventive programming. However, most children involved in criminal activities and unlicensed mining are seen as ‘lost causes’. Cognitive bias of officials, as well as the lack of security and financial resources, has made this group of children the least appealing for humanitarian and development intervention.

My primary research data shows that behind the moral act to protect working children the positionality of practitioners, their representation of child labour and their emotions of fear, concern and frustration are powerful drivers of their decision-making. The ‘evils’ that affect children in mining-and-conflict-
affecting-areas are in most cases normalised and the problem is downplayed in the cases where officials were miners during their childhood or have personal and economic interests in unlicensed mining sites. Therefore, this chapter sought to provide a nuanced analysis of the taken for granted *us-them* relationship between beneficiaries and officials of intervention agencies and State organisations. It demonstrated that the existent blurred line between mining communities and some local authorities in charge of child protection have led to the invisibility and justification of child labour in the service of illicit actors. Furthermore, this ambiguity has facilitated the manipulation of the image of small children by armed actors and mining entrepreneurs to achieve approval from local communities.

In conclusion, as Barnett (2011, p.16) claims, unlike the human rights discourse centred on compliance with legal frameworks, humanitarian discourses focus their attention on “moral codes and sentiments” in relation to situations considered as urgent, where keeping people alive is the priority. However, this study shows that despite humanitarian discourse and the use of children as icons demanding intervention, the idea of protecting all groups of vulnerable children is contradictory in practice. This imbalance in the child-protection frame is reinforced by programming that makes children who navigate between illicit, dangerous, and criminal activities particularly invisible. Building on the discussion of the empirical findings made in Chapter Five, Six and Seven, the next chapter addresses the main research question and reveals the main contributions of this study. Furthermore, it outlines areas for further inquiry and a set of overarching conclusions.
Discussion and conclusions

Introduction

This study primarily concentrated upon the lived experiences of children and young people exposed to natural resource conflicts. In a nuanced and informed case study of childhood in mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Colombia, this thesis links together theorising on social constructions of childhood, children’s actual tactical actions for social navigation, and the humanitarian approach to disadvantaged children. By doing so, the study bridges three main conceptual gaps that were identified in current analysis of the encounter of children with hazardous work during armed conflicts. Firstly, it questions the tendency to assume wars and work in extractive economies are intrinsically contradictory to childhood (see UN General Assembly, 1989; ILO, 1999; UNICEF, 2005). In contrast, my research highlights the ways in which childhood, labour, and armed actors can interact, while also illustrating the agency of the child even in very constrained environments.

Secondly, this thesis challenges the simplistic approach to working children amid resource-fuelled conflicts used by scholars and intervention agencies, which divides them between ‘mere’ shovel-holders (child miners) and those identified as gun-holders (child combatants). These approaches tend to overlook existing intersections between children’s roles and forms of labour during natural resource conflicts, whereas my research illustrates the much
more complex and messy nature of children’s working functions and how their social trajectories interplay.

Thirdly, this research interrogates the hierarchies that emerge in the construction of the humanitarian value of child miners and child combatants. It highlights that, despite international frameworks designating all children in situations of conflict as ‘the most vulnerable children’, in practice they are not equally protected and sentimentalised. I use my research to illustrate how, depending on the construction of their ‘ordeal’, those identified as child miners receive far less attention than those classified as child combatants. In filling these gaps, this research therefore provides conceptual and methodological tools that enhance and broaden interpretations and understandings of social constructions of childhood in times of disorder; these, in turn, shed light on the current limitations of humanitarian practice towards unprivileged children.

Overall, this study draws on and expands these debates by embracing the messiness of natural resource conflicts and approaching theorising and research on disadvantaged children beyond the fixed analytical boxes that currently classify them. Through focusing on hazardous forms of child labour in conflict situations as multi-layered lived realities, this research brings a new focus to children’s opportunities to act and endure constrained circumstances, to the multiple variations of child labour during wartime, and to the factors that inform child protection policies. In doing so, it enriches our understanding of childhood and humanitarian action refracted through the prisms of armed conflict and extractive economies. In the pursuit of these objectives, this study has been directed by one overarching question which was applied in relation to working children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Colombia:
How do combined forms of hazardous work frame the possibilities of action and survival of working children amid armed conflict?

The main research question was addressed via three guiding research sub-questions that were examined throughout the three findings chapters:

a) How do combined forms of hazardous work shape childhood experiences?

b) How do working children adapt when various forms of hazardous work combine during armed conflict?

c) How do intervention agencies perceive and assist children involved in combined forms of hazardous work?

The findings generated through the analysis of the realities, actions, and assistance received by working children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas enabled me to answer the overarching research question.

This final chapter encompasses the main findings and key contributions of this research project. In the first section, I address the overall research question using data from the three empirical chapters to discuss each guiding research sub-question. The second, and more significant part of the chapter, pinpoints the noteworthy conceptual and practical contributions emerging from this study. The broader contributions include exposing the problems of existing categorisations of child labour when applied in conflict-affected areas and proposing a networked interpretation of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, this research enhances existing conceptualisations of children’s agency and the social constructions of age by framing the interactions that children forge with NSAGs and challenging the taken for granted ‘exploiters vs exploited’ relationship. The study also offers a revision of the conception of
children’s vulnerability within the humanitarian architecture and provides methodological resources and recommendations for researching about and with underrepresented children during wartime. The final section of this chapter outlines the limitations of this research, possible areas for future study and overarching conclusions.

8.1 Research Answers

The main question addressed in this research inquired how combined forms of hazardous work frame the possibilities of action and survival of working children during armed conflict. This study found that these forms of work have impacted on three main aspects of children’s realities: local meanings ascribed to childhood, the webs of children’s interactions, and their identities and working functions. It also illustrates how these realities, while to an extent constricting their opportunities for action and survival, have also led young people to make active, tactical decisions to endure the complexity of mining- and conflict-affected settings.

8.1.1 Reconfiguration of local meanings of childhood

In contrast to what some literature has argued (UNICEF, 2005; Singer, 2006; Rajan, 2007; Dallaire 2011), the participation of children in armed conflicts and hazardous forms of work does not always mean the end of childhood. Instead of considering work and armed conflict as inherently contradictory to childhood, this study found that in mining- and conflict-affected areas the involvement of children in work and with armed actors does not necessarily signal a total end to their enjoyment of life. These findings further support the importance of referring to childhood in plural terms and as a social construction that does not have the same connotations in every context, as highlighted by Frønes (1993), Utas (2004) and Bourdillon (2006, p.1205).
A fundamental claim arising from the work of this thesis is that children’s work in ASGM is still locally regarded as an accepted practice. Due to the lifelong attachment of mining communities to this economic activity, gold mining is not considered exploitative. Children are active members of their families wherein they play central roles in the social division of labour. Work is an essential opportunity to learn since it educates and prepares children for their adulthood and teaches them responsibility and solidarity. Mining communities consider childhood as a precious and vulnerable time of life that occurs before puberty, which is not attached to chronological age and which does not necessarily end when work begins. Instead, the transition towards adulthood takes place when young people become pregnant, cohabit with a partner, drop out of school or join mining on a full-time basis. Social age and decision-making are the main determinants of the boundaries of childhood.

The research undertaken for this thesis highlighted how, in mining areas, NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs have capitalised on local meanings ascribed to small children to gain collaboration from mining communities and access to land. These illicit actors have built infrastructure, including playgrounds, and have also distributed school supplies and gifts to children of primary school age (see Chapter Five, Section 5.1.5). These actions provided spaces for the enjoyment of childhood, allowing children access to services that local authorities have not been able to provide adequately and sustainably (see Chapter Six, Section 6.2.2), and reinforced the perception of childhood as a pre-puberty stage. These findings demonstrate that in specific cases NSAGs are not always considered as the nemesis of childhood. Indeed, their intervention has provided the possibility to enjoy a version of childhood that is closer to normative frameworks with opportunities for schooling and leisure even though the underlying motivations is to exercise control over and secure compliance from mining communities.
Furthermore, this thesis demonstrates the usefulness of analysing childhood in mining-and-conflict-affected areas through the lens of ‘social age’ (Clark-Kazak, 2009), which locates children in relation with others. As such, social age supplements the mainstream approach of chronological age and opens the possibilities for more holistic approximations to children’s issues. In particular, the study demonstrates how the industrialisation of ASGM and the arrival of illicit actors to mining communities changed the conditions under which children live and work. Both the patterns of work and some of the social connotations ascribed to children and their roles during peacetime were transformed. The intensive and indiscriminate use of machinery in the extraction of gold rapidly destroyed most of the sites where ASGM was practised. Children started to grow socially at a faster pace since some became economically independent when joining ancillary roles at semi- and fully mechanised mining sites. Likewise, the social division of labour changed when many adults and muchachos had to migrate in the search for gold. Long-distance parenting became a common practice, and small children have to perform more demanding roles at home under the supervision of extended family or neighbours. Children therefore began to perform previously ‘adult’ roles.

Moreover, the analysis of social age enables insight into how combined forms of hazardous work have unevenly affected boys and girls. The intersection between unlicensed mining and armed conflict worsened the existing gender segregation in the labour force of the mineral extraction industry. Muchachas became more vulnerable than their male counterparts due to the machismo around the industry and the imposed barriers to engaging in the semi and fully mechanised forms of mining. Furthermore, problems attached to an active sexual life such as early pregnancies, single mothering, STDs, and sexual
exploitation have made some young girls come to be regarded as adults or in an ‘in-between’ stage when they are economically impoverished and dependant on their extended family (see Chapter Five, Section 5.1.1).

These changes problematize mainstream conceptualisations of child labour in mines which have predominantly approached the issue during peacetime and have confined children to the realm of ASGM, only performing supportive tasks in family-based units (ILO, 2001; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008; André and Godin, 2014; Potter, 2016). Likewise, these findings highlight how the effects of hazardous forms of work on children are gendered. They have different effects on boys and girls and social connotations also differ since their gender intersects with the division of labour and the power relationships built in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. The reconfiguration of local connotations of childhood also illustrates the importance of supplementing prevalent conceptualisation of childhood based on cognitive maturity and age, which, by themselves, result in quite narrow understandings and do not capture the reality of children and muchachos(as) in these areas.

The transformations of some of the social connotations of childhood in mining communities when facing natural resource conflicts indicates that childhood is a dynamic concept that should take into account the socio-economic conditions in which children live. Furthermore, the case study of Colombia demonstrates how even within constrained environments such as mining-and-conflict-affected areas, there is still room for playing, schooling, interacting with NSAGs, working, and being a child. This case study also demonstrates that children and their families are able to adjust and negotiate the ideas of childhood and vulnerability.
8.1.2 Alteration of the webs of interactions of children

My research in Colombia demonstrated that combined forms of hazardous work modified the existing networks of interactions of working children and thus their potential for action and survival. As similar studies on child’s agency have demonstrated (Dyson, 2004, p.138; Clark-Kazak, 2009; Well, 2011; Gleason, 2016, p.448), children simultaneously operate among several networks of relationships established with peers, relatives, and people outside their family, including intervention agencies. This study found that beyond these actors, NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs were also annexed to the networks of interactions of children and young people.

The inclusion of these illicit actors within the flows of interactions of children exposed them to worsening security conditions in their villages, due to disputes between NSAGs for the control of mining regions and to the armed operations led by the Colombian army against unlicensed mining (see Chapter Six, Section 6.2.2). Moreover, the emerging networks established with NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs changed the peacetime roles performed by young people as *simple* miners, established additional entrance barriers for female and unskilled young workers, and attracted a migratory labour force from neighbouring regions which made access to job opportunities scarce and competitive. These additional actors have had an impact on the experiences of childhood, its social constructions and the risks attached to existent hazardous forms of labour.

These shifts in the patterns of interaction between children and a growing range of actors that my research uncovered, also, illustrate that children’s actions do not take place according to settled patterns during wartime. Just as evolving conflicts are unpredictable, the agents within those volatile settings or “seascapes” (Vigh, 2006 and 2009) are continually moving and reinventing themselves. Actors have different degrees of negotiation power and there are
various exposure levels to hazardous work and armed conflict. Consequently, solidarity, alliances and friendship have become the “lubricant of working relations” (Dyson, 2004, p.138) where children participate across dynamic networks that are continuously produced, transformed or dissolved depending on the security conditions and the relationships forged with peers, adults, NSAGs or mining entrepreneurs.

Nonetheless, this study has also established that despite the constrained conditions in mining-and-conflict-affected areas, children create possibilities for their operation and survival. Children and young people forge and maintain supplementary networks to access jobs in semi- and fully mechanised mining, to fulfil their desires for conspicuous consumption, and to enable them to undertake other roles in the service of NSAGs and criminal organisations. Moreover, some muchachas strengthen their intra-gender relationships in order to overcome existing limitations on their everyday life and their segregation from industrialised forms of mining. Muchachas bolster their peer relationships by supporting their female counterparts on tasks associated with childbearing, domestic chores, washing carpets used in dredgers, accessing food, and even taking part in leisure activities (see Chapter Five, Section 5.1.3). Similarly, adults and children carry out additional manoeuvres trying to make the best of the constrained contexts in which they are immersed when interacting with NGOs and governmental institution. Some of these actions include, for instance, accommodating the universal child discourse and the guidelines of governmental programmes to fit their economic needs or never referring to unlicensed industrialised mining as ‘illegal’.

Within the new networks of interactions established with the arrival of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs, adaptation and flexibility have become central abilities to help endure violence and to seize the few possibilities of engaging in
remunerated work, leisure activities, schooling, or community events. Working and engaging in other types of roles even if it implies armed tasks, are actions framed in the quest for survival of young people. Contrary to existing legal and institutional considerations of vulnerability and dependence as inherent features of childhood, these findings are in line with previous studies (Boyden and Berry, 2004, p.xvii) that demonstrate how the vulnerability of children during wartime does not eliminate their abilities and possibilities of action. They adjust and tailor their working skills in order to overcome the existent burdensome conditions of their surrounding settings.

Overall, my research corroborates the idea that children’s agency is fluid, socially framed and operates through tactical movements and decisions depending on the children’s position in the networks they integrate (Honwana, 2005; Utas, 2005; Bourdillon, 2006, p.1203; Drumbl, 2010). Opportunities are not fixed or available for all children and are webbed within complex systems of interactions which intersect with criminal activities carried out in hiding. In this thesis, the actions undertaken by children and youths are shown to be tactical, since they are specific, transitory, and aim to maximise their immediate conditions within mining-and-conflict-affected areas.

It is central to notice that this research also found that all children do not exercise agency in the same manner. Some children and their families have rejected any involvement with unlicensed mining or NSAGs, whereas others have not undertaken any particular action in the search for survival. As Gleason (2016, p.457) warns, it is important also to acknowledge the presence and existence of children who do not exercise agency or whose experiences are not heard by researchers or historians. My study demonstrates that even though not all children are agentic beings with the same capacities of choice, some action has been possible.
8.1.3 Unfixed identities and roles of child workers

This study highlights how combined forms of hazardous work placed working children in a grey area where their roles and identities have become imprecise. As a result, their opportunities for protection and survival are more constrained. The mechanisation of mining and the influx of armed actors and mining entrepreneurs have diversified the range of available working roles in which young people engage. Therefore, the participation of young miners is no longer restricted to ASGM, and the borderline between armed and unarmed functions has become obscure. The empirical data of this research demonstrates that some children undertake ancillary roles connected with the unlicensed exploitation of gold as well as tasks in the service of illicit actors such as messengering, body guarding, paid murder, sexual exploitation or kidnapping (see Chapter Six, Section 6.2). Both incentives and temporalities of these working functions change depending on the region, the armed group or the specific task undertaken. Therefore, there is not a single pattern of involvement in unlicensed mining.

Contrary to what the literature on children armed conflict has argued (IPEC, 2005, p.30; Bales, Trood and Williamson, 2009, p.107; Le Billon, 2009, p.346), in mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Chocó unarmed roles are not coincidental, a side-effect or less important. This thesis correspondingly demonstrates that unarmed functions are equally central in the functioning of unlicensed gold exploitation and therefore to NSAGs. Considering that “adults need and use children” (Reynolds, 2004, p.264), peacetime roles undertaken by young people are transformed, combined or eliminated during armed conflicts. As a practical consequence of this analysis, I would suggest that any effort to tackle child labour in mining-and-conflict-affected areas should first identify how child labour is used during wartime since the extraction and extortion of gold by
NSAGs and illicit actors are documented here as blurring the borders between labels, forms of work and categories of children.

The fluidity of the experiences and courses of action undertaken by children in mining-and-conflict-affected areas also problematizes existing legal and institutional definitions of the “worst forms of child labour” (ILO, 1999) and the consequent division between dangerous but legal labour [i.e., mining] and hazardous and illegal work [i.e., child recruitment for armed conflict] (OIT and IPEC, 2003, p.30). During natural resource conflicts, child labour cannot be defined as a set of unique, unchangeable and observable tasks elaborated via a single relationship between exploiters and exploited beings. This simplistic division overlooks the fact that, during armed conflicts, children cross the boundaries between roles, categories and identities in their quest for survival. Similarly, various forms of child labour coexist, overlap and interplay during wartime.

Moreover, these normative conceptions of child labour during armed conflict have created hierarchies of value where child combatants are regarded as the ones who deserve urgent protection (see Chapter Seven). When various forms of hazardous work are combined, the likelihood of protection of child miners or other groups of disadvantaged children become more limited. This study demonstrates how, beyond statistics and laws, the emotions and the positionality of officials are central drivers of the implementation of child protection policies, as are representations of children’s suffering. Existent scales of value problematize the alleged hierarchy of vulnerability of disadvantaged children in conflict areas in the humanitarian rhetoric, given that in practice not all children at risk in the midst of resource-fuelled conflicts have the same humanitarian priority.
This section of the chapter drew together the central findings of this study and demonstrated that the possibilities of action and endurance of children in mining areas of Chocó has become severely curtailed since NSAGs and other illicit actors started to dispute the control and extortion of gold. Specifically, this research addressed the main research question by revealing that resource-fuelled conflicts altered three main aspects of children’s lives. Firstly, natural resource conflicts have transformed how childhood is locally perceived and constructed by mining communities. Secondly, they significantly impact how children forge and maintain relationships with the actors that make up their social networks. Thirdly, the working functions that children and young people undertake, as well as their identities. These transformations have a direct impact on humanitarian practice in the area since not all working children in mining-and-conflict are equally perceived and classified as subjects worthy of protection. However, the findings covered in this section also revealed that children and young people have carried out tactical actions to cope with existing challenges through adaptation, flexibility, and the development of negotiation skills. Having examined the research answers in this section, in the following part of the chapter, I present the methodological and theoretical contributions of this study.

8.2 Wider contributions

This thesis offers fresh insights into the debates on childhood, child labour and humanitarianism as well as the methodologies that can be implemented to conduct research with young people in conflict zones. Firstly, I clearly show that the mainstream static notions of childhood do not capture the complexity of actual realities of children during armed conflicts. I expand existing conceptualisations of children’s agency and social age by framing them in regard to their interaction with illegal actors. Secondly, I query the linear
analytical approximation to child labour in extractive industries that has not taken into account the transformations that occur during an armed conflict, as well as the mobility of children and the sets of relationships they forge. I propose a networked interpretation of child labour that encompasses the complexity and messiness of mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Thirdly, I conceptually critique the hierarchy of vulnerability that has emerged regarding children involved in the worst forms of child labour within the humanitarian architecture and provide evidence of the practical implications of current narrow understandings of their situation during armed conflict. Finally, this thesis presents methodological practices that enhance research with young people in conflictive settings.

8.2.1 Expanding the conceptualisation of children’s agency and social age

The general objective of this study was to determine how combined forms of hazardous work frame the possibilities of action and survival of children. Such a purpose involved applying an analytical frame that allows examination of indigenous meanings and constructions of childhood in order to understand the local connotations of children’s work, actions, and struggles. This frame relies on the concept of social age proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009). Greatly informed by the contributions made by the sociology of childhood and the feminist theory in development studies, this concept allows for a clearer analysis of childhood in mining-and-conflict-affected areas by placing children in relationships with others. Thus, without ignoring the existence and influence of definitions of childhood based on chronological age, the concept of social age permits complementing this mainstream perspective by contextualising the experience of children within localised realities.
The concept of social age as proposed by Clark-Kazak (2009) enables more relevant understanding of the socio-cultural constructions of childhood by examining social markers, inter- and intra-generational relationships, as well as local interpretations attached to physical development and decision-making of children. However, as this thesis unfolded, it became clear that referring to peers, adults and senior adults did not accurately reflect the diversity of actors with whom children interact in mining-and-conflict-affected areas. Therefore, the inter- and intra-generational relationships need to be deconstructed. I propose that it is important to conceptually differentiate the relationship that children and youths forge with locals from the interaction they establish with members of NSAGs and owners and managers of mining sites. This differentiation within the group of adults and peers does not disregard the fact that members of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs are not always external to mining communities. Nonetheless, their role as armed actors and job providers place them at a different level of interaction that calls for a separate analysis.

By including these relationships within the conceptualisation of social age, it is possible to have a more holistic and accurate description of the diversity of actors and interactions that frame social connotations ascribed to childhood in conflict-zones. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, my study found that it was the activities of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs that changed the nature of children’s work, restricted their possibilities of operation and survival, and modified the webs of interaction in which young people navigate. As a result, some of the social connotations of their roles were altered and their childhoods restricted. However, at the same time, some actions of NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs helped to enhance childhood experiences by providing infrastructure and utilities that contribute to children’s leisure and schooling. These actions also reinforced the social value of small children and tightened the links of locals with illicit actors. Thus, the findings that emerged from the
primary data demonstrate the pertinence of expanding the conceptualisation of social age when applied in conflict-affected settings.

Furthermore, this study also contributes to expanding existing theories of children’s agency. The conceptualisations of “tactical agency” (Honwana, 2005) and “social navigation” (Vigh, 2006) are insightful theoretical approximations that allowed examination of the decisions and actions undertaken by African youths within conflict-affected zones. These theoretical approximations also helped me to demonstrate how young people in Chocó operate as active subjects whose choices are socially framed. They intervene in their realities to create opportunities and maximise the constrained conditions in which they operate. By applying these concepts in a Latin American context and in areas where armed conflict is combined with other “evils” (Ophir, 2010, p.60) such as extractive economies, my thesis expands the theoretical scope of agency and adds new elements to the analysis. Similarly, this study also shows the usefulness of agency and navigation discourses as analytical tools beyond the African context.

Unlike the case studies analysed by Vigh (2006) and Honwana (2005), this thesis found that mining communities in Chocó are not entirely disempowered. Given that Afro-Colombian communities are the collective owners of the land, they have a certain leeway for decision-making, albeit small. Adults, as well as muchachos(as), have opportunities to negotiate some of the conditions under which they undertake their roles. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter Three, various community councils and social leaders have resisted and undertaken actions in order to protect their territories from mechanised mining and NSAGs. Therefore, the experience of young people in Colombia reaffirms the importance of identifying the various levels of negotiation power since young
people within the same context are not equally weak or disenfranchised. The relationship between ‘the weak’ and ‘the strong’ is more intricate.

Although to a certain extent, acknowledgement of the existence of different levels of weaknesses could reinforce the hierarchies established by humanitarian organisations between groups of children in those areas, I argue that the difference between children does not rely solely on their roles. I suggest that the levels of negotiation power and action define the conditions of the vulnerability of children. Therefore, more nuanced and contextualised analysis is needed since, as demonstrated in this research study, children involved in hazardous forms of work do not remain equally weak and vulnerable in time and space.

Likewise, this research established that despite the difficult socio-economic conditions in mining villages, poverty is not in all cases the primary motivation to participate in hazardous forms of work. Moreover, not all impoverished children from mining areas are involved in activities around the extraction of gold or ancillary functions in the service of NSAGs. This study found that ideas of prestige, gender identities, political ideology, social endorsement, feelings of pride, and low-entry requirements are additional reasons for children’s involvement in hazardous forms of work in Chocó. These findings broadly support the work of other studies in the field (Zelizer, 1985; Dowdney, 2003; Maconachie and Hilson, 2016) which claim that blaming economic hardship as only driver of child labour oversimplifies the reasoning behind the participation of young people in work, and overlooks the role of moral tenets and ideas in children’s agency and decision-making. By expanding the analysis beyond poverty and the binary of exploiters–exploited, a door is opened, although small, to understand how hazardous forms of labour combine during ongoing armed conflicts.
Additionally, this PhD research shows that agency does not always imply going against the established structure or set of rules. As Mahmood (2005, p.15) argues, agential capacity also takes place “in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms”. As discussed in Chapter Five, institutional discourses around child protection are not entirely alien to mining communities. Adults and children are aware of the politics of childhood and, therefore, adapt their identities and discourses when interacting with intervention agencies in order to access services or to reduce the stigmatisation around unlicensed gold mining. Similarly, young workers have become more flexible beings aiming to engage in mechanised forms of mining. In order to overcome the lack of job offers, these workers have tailored their skills to fulfil any available working position within mining sites and along the supply chain. Youths act within the set of rules established by mining entrepreneurs and NSAGs, as well as through the secrecy and illegality that surrounds their economic activities. My study reinforces the importance of adaptation and negotiation as integral elements of agential behaviour.

8.2.2 Networked interpretation of child labour

As discussed in Chapters Two and Six, although a growing body of academics have analysed the association between subsoil minerals and wars, the involvement of children and young people during natural resource conflicts has been less comprehensively examined. Child combatants are seen as disconnected from those who work in mine pits. Moreover, available studies on child labour in mines have been conducted mainly during peacetime or in post-war settings. Little is known about child workers during active natural resource conflicts. As Reynolds suggests (2004, p.264) in the quest for eliminating the worst forms of child labour, including the use of children in hostilities, it is, therefore, necessary to first determine how these forms of work are used during wartime. This thesis contributes to filling this gap. I propose an interlinked
interpretation of child labour that connects the various forms of work that are performed simultaneously during natural resource conflicts to the range of actors involved. A networked interpretation of child labour enables a better understanding of the lived realities of children, as well as determining how children's work is used to finance and maintain natural resource conflicts.

This research is in line with the studies of Zelizer (1985, p.75) and Lieten (2011, p.2) that warn about the impossibility of drawing a clear and sharp line to define which activities can or cannot be considered as child labour. This impossibility derives from the multiple subjective values attached to children’s activities and the socio-cultural contexts where they are immersed. By using the theoretical approach of seascapes, this thesis demonstrates that instead of looking for defining dividing lines, it is essential to understand child labour as a web of interactions that actors constantly navigate. Given that child labour during natural resource conflicts does not entirely square with existing categorisations, this thesis proposes that the analysis conceptually embrace its inherent ‘messiness’. That is the fluid boundaries between labels, forms of work, and categories of children. Embracing the existent disorderliness of mining-and-conflict-affected areas allows capturing the complexity of actual realities and providing protection to a more comprehensive group of children at risk.

This study also shows that the classification of the worst forms of child labour and its normative subdivision between illicit and dangerous is problematic and is far from facilitating an understanding of the complexities of lived experiences of child workers. It does not take into account how children’s jobs cross the analytical boundaries between roles and forms of work, especially in constrained situations. The case study of Colombia shows that traditional forms of child labour performed during peacetime are altered and adapted during
armed conflict. Some youngsters work in ASGM while others work in semi-and fully mechanised forms of gold mining. Some work as miners and study, some transit permanently from miners to combatants, and others perform simultaneously armed and unarmed roles in the service of NSAGs in urban and rural areas during unfixed periods. Hence, there is not a standardised way for children to engage in extractive economies in conflict-affected areas.

Furthermore, the case study of Colombia problematizes the commonly alluded to relationship between exploiters (adults) and exploited (children) present in hazardous forms of child labour. This thesis demonstrates that there is no single, unidirectional relationship between employers and employees. The presence of numerous actors such as NSAGs, mining entrepreneurs, local miners, young workers from nearby areas, and child labourers shows the diversity of actors that determine and participate in unlicensed forms of mining. Likewise, these actors have different levels of power and decision-making and distinct capacities to make alliances. Both the array of working functions and the diversity of players that emerge from empirical data are indicative of the suitability of a networked interpretation of child labour.

Thus, the comparative schema of working functions of children and muchachos(as), proposed in Chapter Six, offers a significant contribution to the field of child labour studies. This is the first study that bridges the two apparently delimited social realities of child labour in armed conflict and mines by examining in detail the actual roles children perform and how they are transformed, intersected and replaced in times of upheaval. Moreover, the proposed schema of working functions demonstrates that young miners occupy multiple positions in complex webs of interactions which are intersected by social constructions of age, sexual divisions of labour, and outside actors such as NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs. These webs of interaction determine the
frequency and nature of the working functions performed by young people. This thesis provides a significant step forward in deconstructing the analytical umbrella of the worst forms of child labour. Such deconstruction allows reassessment of the categories used to represent the realities of working children when multiples forms of labour are entangled. Moreover, the critical interpretation of child labour during conflicts fuelled by natural resources also enables us to scrutinise the language and meanings attached to childhood and children’s work. Meanwhile, together, language and meanings determine in practice who is entitled to humanitarian assistance.

8.2.3 Furthering our understanding of the humanitarianism of childhood

As discussed in Chapter Seven, legal frameworks and humanitarian agencies have iconised children as the quintessential representation of vulnerability and innocence. Children have been constructed as subjects in need that deserve prioritised and timely protection especially when involved in hazardous activities such as armed conflicts, extractive economies, sexual exploitation or drug trafficking. Children within these categories are considered as the most vulnerable. Yet, through a nuanced and informed analysis of the perceptions and assistance provided by intervention agencies in the research areas, this thesis has argued that despite the constrained conditions of child workers in those settings, they (the so-called most vulnerable) are not equally prioritised. Indeed, the study found that intervention agencies and governmental authorities have given more attention and assistance to child combatants, neglecting others just as vulnerable.

The problematic classification of child labour into dangerous and illegal activities overlooks the fluidity of children’s roles in mining-and-conflict-affected areas and does not reflect their complex reality. It also creates ambiguous separations
between children. Those identified as child combatants are recognised as victims of the armed conflict and entitled to urgent and special attention whereas child miners and those working in other ancillary roles are not deemed as such although, in actuality, they may be just as vulnerable. Thus, this thesis demonstrates how, in practice, narrow understandings of the situation of working children in mining areas of Chocó have undermined the chances of protection of most young people, as well as their representation as victims of the internal armed conflict.

My thesis questions the current response given to young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas and also problematizes prevalent arguments in the literature on the imagery of childhood that identify an exceptional emotional interest in disadvantaged children within the humanitarian world. It demonstrates that although childhood has functioned as a commodity of humanitarian campaigning and charity (Burman, 1994, p.240), it is inaccurate to suggest that disadvantaged children are equally sentimentalised or evoke institutional interventions. Depending on the role performed (i.e., armed or unarmed) and the activities in which children are engaged (i.e., hazardous or dangerous), equally vulnerable children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas have a different humanitarian value. Those solely classified as child miners are the less preferred category of children for intervention. Likewise, those already deeply immersed in criminality or gold mining may be rendered as ‘lost cases’ or without attainable salvation, as attested by some of the interviews of officials.

Building on the work of Ophir (2010) who, through the concept of “catastrophization”, deconstructs humanitarian appeals by analysing the objective and discursive planes in which they are produced, this thesis has extended this analysis by showing the ways in which the positionality of
officials and their “emotion-based impulses” (Suski, 2009) play a central role in the protection or neglect of disadvantaged children. My study demonstrates that sentiments of concern, fear, and frustration are powerful inhibitors of child protection actions and determinants of the representation of children. Furthermore, the childhood experiences of officials and their proximity to the reality of mining communities are additional drivers of action and key factors that influence the way children in need are classified. The fact that some officials in charge of child protection are from mining communities or even play a dual role, as officials and mining entrepreneurs, have led them to relativize the construction of child miners as vulnerable subjects. Therefore, the principles of independence and humanity that should direct humanitarian responses during conflict are clearly compromised. By complementing Ophir’s theorisation with Suski’s concept of emotion-based impulses, this thesis contributes to understanding Ophir’s observation (2010, p.59) that the construction of a situation as an emergency or a catastrophe implies a ‘cognitive bias’.

This PhD study makes a significant contribution to child-based humanitarianism by challenging the way vulnerability is currently used to categorise disadvantaged children within the humanitarian architecture. This thesis revealed the practical implications of existing hierarchies of value regarding children’s ‘credible suffering’ and the ambiguities of the discourse around the ‘most vulnerable children’. Moreover, this thesis interrogates child labour as a “moral category” (Bourdillon, 2006, p.1203) and challenges the ethics of representations of working children offering original insights to revise the politics of childhood and the epistemologies of humanitarian intervention towards disadvantaged children.
8.2.4 Enhancing methodological research approaches

This research study approaches the lives of children and adults in mining-and-conflict-affected areas by combining two methodological perspectives. The “composite approach” to collecting data proposed by Barakat et al. (2002) and the “mosaic approach” suggested by Clark and Moss (2001) to undertake research with children. The composite approach proposes the use of a collection of flexible and creative methods to overcome existing challenges when conducting field research in warzones, such as issues of access, bias, and ethical issues. It advises applying different research techniques depending on the groups of participants and the levels of access. However, the composite approach does not detail specific methods to research children in those settings. I overcame this limitation by combining it with the mosaic approach.

The mosaic approach proposes the use of a mixture of tools based on creative expression and age appropriateness. As discussed in Chapter Four, this multi-technique method aims to meaningfully engage with children and their multiple (mosaic) views regarding the world in which they are embedded. It was initially designed for practitioners and scholars interested in early childhood and to be applied mainly in institutional settings. Although constrained environments such as conflict zones were not within the initial scope of the mosaic approach, the participatory nature of this line of research gives particular value to children’s voices. Therefore, in seeking to research young people’s experience in constrained environments, the complementarity of the mosaic and the composite approaches is evident.

By combining the two approaches, my study offers new insights to refine existing strategies to research with children and adults in times of upheaval. In concert, these methodological perspectives aid attempts to decipher conflicting understandings that intersect when examining the experiences of young people.
amid armed conflicts. For instance, they facilitate the analytical dialogue between different groups of participants (i.e., child workers, NSAGs, NGOs and military forces or law enforcement bodies) by using a range of methods where adaptability, complementarity and creativity were paramount. My methodological proposal exhorts future researchers to open the possibility of using multiple research methods that adjust to the levels of access granted by researched subjects, and the uneven levels of trust gained throughout the collection of data in volatile environments. For example, as I explain in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.3, although most children took part in group sessions where I used imaginative methods, I had to be flexible and adjust the methodology used with some children in Rio Quito. Seeking to reduce the risks for these children, I engaged them through individual semi-structured interviews. Even though the accounts of these participants were more limited compared to those during group sessions, I was able to observe more carefully the interaction between children and adults when talking about gold mining.

My study also advances our knowledge about the effectiveness of using sensitive cultural material and the importance of applying methods able to be adjusted given the changeable conditions of war-torn zones. For instance, one of the main challenges that I had to overcome was the widespread non-literacy levels in mining areas. Thus, I had to design material where images were privileged and Afro-Colombian communities felt represented (See Images 1 and 2 in Chapter Four). Likewise, I realised that creative material is not confined to the children’s world. It also helped me to put adult participants at ease and engage their perspectives in alternative ways. Through this, I corroborated Clark’s (2011, p.322) assertion that creative methods are not “child-only approaches”: They are successful research methods with both adults and children when their strengths are placed at the foreground.
In addition, this PhD research offers a fresh methodological perspective on how to ethically examine childhood in areas where illegality and criminality are interconnected. It did so by negotiating the terms under which the research is conducted and “understanding, respecting and incorporating local ethos” (Abebe and Bessel, 2014, p.127). Local ethos contains the values and views that frame the lives and practices of a community, and, therefore, it shapes the roles that children perform and their position within their communities.

Understanding the local ethos involved, for example, opening the possibility of having under-18 year olds participating in group discussions with adults (charlas) or allocating time for local practices such as prayers and jokes prior to the research sessions. Moreover, it also involved respecting local agendas and working schedules of participants by conducting some research activities at night or during miners’ free time. Beyond ensuring validity and reliability, valuing local ethos enables a meaningful and respectful engagement of participants.

By understanding the local ethos of mining-and-conflict-affected communities, this PhD thesis has also shed light on the importance of the use of language while conducting research. The terms and words I used to discuss the existent issues in these areas were central to negotiate different trust relationships, approaching coded narratives, and ‘reading between the lines’. For instance, by avoiding referring to local practices as illegal or exploitative, I was able to create rapport with participants while understanding the existent nuances when referring to unlicensed mining. Similarly, my progressive familiarity with local jargon regarding mining activities, as well as NSAGs, proved to be crucial to creating a safe research environment in areas surrounded by uncertainty and fear.
I would suggest that future ethnographic research approaches could benefit from the interdisciplinary approach used in this study. By combining elements from the anthropology of conflict, childhood studies and humanitarianism, this research confirms that a nuanced perspective can be provided by using various examination techniques and conceptual frameworks from a variety of complementing disciplines. Moreover, this study reveals that reflexivity is as central as the interconnected positionalities of the researcher. Personal identifiers can be strategically used to gain access or build trust, but they can also restrict the immersion of scholars. Similar studies can benefit from the strategies I implemented to manage suspicion, stay safe and take advantage of the perceived weakness of the researcher (i.e., gender, age, class) so as to explore moral tenets and perceptions.

In sum, the methodological approach and the research techniques used in this study make a contribution to the available literature around methodological approximations to children during armed conflict. Furthermore, it offers a set of strategies and practical techniques which are transferable to other settings where natural resource conflicts take place, or areas where security and access are compromised. Having established my main contributions, the following section identifies some areas for future enquiry.

8.3 Ways forward

In seeking to better understand the lived experiences of children and young people during natural resource conflicts, this thesis has raised additional questions and identified new areas for further research. At a broader level, the research revealed the need for more in-depth examination of the interconnections between child labour in gold mining with other forms of work, such as sexual exploitation and drug trafficking, that are also prevalent in
mining-and-conflict-affected areas. What emerges, precisely, is the need and importance of continuing to analytically connect these multiple forms of labour, which emerge in practice as part of the “criminal resource portfolios” of NSAGs (Rettberg and Ortiz-Riomalo, 2016, p.83). Analytical and practical understandings of child labour during armed conflict would benefit from further theoretical development of the networked interpretations I propose, whereby the multiplicity of actors, forms of work, and the relationships forged between them are identified and can continue to be unravelled.

Although this study included gender as a variable to broadly analyse the experience of male and female youths in hazardous forms of work and the interaction between peers, there was not a specific focus on gendered experiences of child labour. The promising findings of this research indicate there is a need for further research into the gendered experiences of child workers, especially before they reach puberty. In the same way, as mentioned in Chapter Four, due to restrictions on access and language barriers, my research only included Afro-Colombian youngsters. The study of other childhoods (i.e., indigenous and mestizo children) that are also involved in hazardous forms of work in mining-and-conflict-affected areas would add a great deal by offering a more comprehensive examination of the experience of children in those areas. Furthermore, it would permit assessing the role of race and ethnic background in the social constructions of age, agency capacity and the participation of children and young people in work during natural resource conflicts.

Further studies are recommended to develop a fuller picture of the possibilities of action and survival of child workers. These could include research involving other minerals and natural resources (e.g., silver, coltan, precious stones or timber), other NSAGs (e.g., dissident groups associated with FARC-EP or the
ELN in the case of Colombia), as well as urban areas. Since mining pits are located in rural villages, the connection between the working functions around the extraction process roles and those of the supply chain that are performed in metropolitan zones is usually analytically overlooked. Although my study provides significant insights around existing connections between these, a more extensive analysis is still needed. Likewise, further case studies in additional regions of Colombia and other countries where natural resource conflicts take place would offer a comparative perspective that a single case study in Chocó cannot offer. This has practical significance since it is through developing deeper understandings across various case studies that humanitarian agencies could potentially benefit and hopefully offer more accurate interventions.

8.4 Conclusions

In this final chapter, I used the empirical data discussed in previous chapters to answer the overarching question of the research. Moreover, I linked these findings with broader theoretical debates. I argued that combined hazardous forms of work modified the possibilities of action and survival of children and young people in mining-and-conflict-affected areas of Chocó. In particular, the exposure of child workers to the mechanisation of ASGM and the arrival and control exerted by NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs altered some of the local connotations attached to childhood, the social webs of interactions of children and muchachos(as), the identities and the working functions that they traditionally performed during peacetime. Nonetheless, despite these transformations, children and their communities have adapted and negotiated to maximise their opportunities. Thus, the overarching point this thesis has attempted to make is that childhood does not necessarily end when hazardous working activities begin.
The findings of this study contribute to theoretical and methodological debates on childhood, child labour and humanitarianism in several ways. My work contributes to child labour studies by exposing the drawbacks associated with the use of current categorisations of child labour in conflict-affected areas and proposing a networked analysis that identifies the multiplicity of actors and work functions in which children and young people engage. By embracing the ‘messiness’ of natural resource conflicts, a more refined analysis is offered, on that more closely resembles the complexity that exists in practice. My thesis also contributes to existent conceptualisations of tactical agency and social age by framing the relationships of young workers with NSAGs and mining entrepreneurs and proposing a more nuanced analysis of the power relationships that exceed the binary assumptions of weak-powerful subjects. Moreover, I demonstrated that, through critically reflecting on the emotions of child protection officials and their representations of children from mining-and-conflict-affected areas, the hierarchies of value that govern humanitarian interventions towards the most vulnerable children are exposed. Finally, a contribution is offered to the devices and methodological research approaches implemented in conflict-affected zones. I argue that multi-methods strategies are especially suitable to overcome the inherent challenges of warzones. In those contexts where literacy and access are significant barriers, creative methodologies, appropriate language and ethnically sensitive devices proved to be effective with both adults and children.

Overall, this PhD research presents original insights that contribute to ways of understanding some of the multiple variations of child labour during wartime when the theoretical borderlines between forms of work, roles and groups of children are redefined. These innovative findings scrutinise the epistemologies of humanitarian interventions concerning disadvantaged children and help us to deconstruct the politics of childhood amid gold mining and armed conflict.
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_____. Derecho de Petición de Información S-2016-0675519-0101, 16 Diciembre 2016.


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### Appendix 1. List of participants from intervention agencies, governmental organisations, army and police officers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex-environmental procurator of Chocó</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Judicial Procurator – Chocó</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Station – Unión Panamericana</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>08.12.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – Chocó</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission to support the Peace Process in Colombia (MAPP-OEA)</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Judge – Specialised in Land Restitution- Quibdó</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>03.03.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Verification Mission for the FARC-EP peace process</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17.03.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research group on Mining and Human Rights – Rosario University (Bogotá)</td>
<td>Informal conversation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace and Reconciliation Foundation</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>01.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CODECHOCO</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological University of Chocó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Comptroller’s Office of the Chocó headquarters</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Research Method</td>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Comptroller’s Office of Chocó – Fiscal management</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman office – Chocó (Indigenous and Ethnic Minorities Office)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman office – Chocó (Indigenous and Ethnic Minorities Office)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental Secretary of Economic Development and Natural Resources - Chocó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29.11.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman office – Chocó (SAT – Early Alert System)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental Secretary of Education - Chocó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<td>15.12.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ombudsman office – Chocó (Office of Childhood, Youth, and Senior Adults)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
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<td>12.12.2016</td>
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<td>Major’s office Unión Panamericana – Psychology office</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.12.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s defender’s office - Unión Panamericana</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15.12.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Unit Against Illegal Mining (UNIMIL)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22.12.2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex consultant – UN Human Rights Chocó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Environmental Research of the Pacific - IIAP</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school teacher Bebarama</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Research Method</td>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Secretariat of Interior Chocó (Office of Victims)</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>03.02.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diocese of Quibdó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>09.03.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War Child - Chocó</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Commissioner of Medio Atrato</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICBF Bogotá – Division in charge of the worst forms of child labour.</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somos Tesoro Programme</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical secretary - CIPRUNNA</td>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26.05.2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2. List of participants individually interviewed from mining communities.

| ‘Community mother’\textsuperscript{247}, Unión Panamericana | 08.12.2016 |
| Community council Unión Panamericana | 08.12.2016 |
| Primary school teacher Bebarama | 21.01.2017 |
| Female miner (26 years old) | 01.05.2017 |
| Female miner (45 years old) – Rio Quito | 01.05.2017 |
| Female miner (31 years old) – Rio Quito | 01.05.2017 |
| Female Indigenous (44 years old) – Rio Quito | 02.05.2017 |
| Female community member (31 years old) – Rio Quito | 02.05.2017 |
| Female community member (24 years old) – Rio Quito | 02.05.2017 |
| Female miner (61 years old) – Rio Quito | 02.05.2017 |
| Female miner (37 years old) – Rio Quito | 03.05.2017 |
| Female ex-miner (65 years old) – Rio Quito | 03.05.2017 |
| Female miner (56 years old) – Rio Quito | 03.05.2017 |
| Representative Community Council – Rio Quito | 03.05.2017 |
| Community Council COCOMOPOCA | 12.05.2017 |
| Male miner (13 years old) | 28.01.2017 |
| Female miner (15 years old) | 28.01.2017 |
| Female miner (17 years old) | 28.01.2017 |
| Female miner (17 years old) | 28.01.2017 |
| Male miner (10 years old) | 28.01.2017 |

\textsuperscript{247} ‘Community mothers’ and ‘community fathers’ are local members of communities that take care of children until the age of 5 years. The ICBF implemented this initiative in 1986. There are approximately 69,000 community mothers and fathers that take care of around one million of children in Colombia (ICBF, 2019)
Appendix 3. Guiding research questions used during semi-structured interviews conducted with officials from intervention agencies and governmental organisations.

Official profile
- How long have you been in this position?
- What is your professional background?
- Where are you from?

Representation:
- Which are the main situations that have affected children and youth in mining areas of Chocó?
- Why do you think that children are involved in the extraction of gold in the Chocó? What are the main risk factors?
- In your own words, how could children working in gold mining be characterised? [E.g. are they mainly male? Do they have little education? etc.]
- Are children who work in mining only linked to artisanal mining or are they also in semi- and mechanised forms of mining? What working roles do they perform?
- What have been the areas most affected by child labour in mining? Have there been changes over time?

Institutional Response
- Which are the intervention programs that have taken place to protect children from work in mines and being recruited as combatants in Chocó?
- What are/ have been the main challenges that your institution faced when trying to tackle child labour in mines and the recruitment of youths as combatants?
- How is the relationship with other organisations at the local and national level working on child protection?
- What would be an effective intervention for the reduction of cases of child labour in mines and the other forms of hazardous labour?
- How does your institution report the cases of children working in mines in areas where NSAGs are present?
- Have you ever received a case of children working simultaneously in various forms of labour? If so, how does your institution report those cases? Is there a database with this information?
Appendix 4. List of participants interviewed from NSAGs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political Ex-commander – 34th Front FARC-EP (Alias Benkos Biohó)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.03.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former combatants – AUC – Pacific Block</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.04.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-commander – 34th Front FARC-EP (Alias Enrique)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>29.04.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-combatant – 34th Front FARC-EP (17 years old – Alias Jean Carlos)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-commander – 34th Front FARC-EP (Alias Melkin)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.05.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-commander – 34th Front FARC-EP (Alias Raul)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.05.2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 5. Number of women and men who participated in Charlas from mining communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unión Panamericana – Community 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unión Panamericana – Community 2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Quito – Community 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio Quito – Community 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 6. Number of children (between 8 and 15 years of age) who participated in Imaginative sessions from mining communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unión Panamericana – Community 1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unión Panamericana – Community 2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebarama – Community 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 7. Consent form for adults.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Número</th>
<th>Pregunta</th>
<th>Sí</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Confirme que he leído, o se me ha leído en voz alta, la hoja de información del proyecto arriba mencionado, he tenido la oportunidad de examinar la información y hacer preguntas que han sido respondidas satisfactoriamente.</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Entiendo que mi participación en el estudio es voluntaria y que soy libre de retirarme, después que el consentimiento sea concedido y de manera previa a la fecha de publicación, si da una razón y sin perjuicio de ningún tratamiento / servicio.</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Autorizo a que las entrevistas y/o grupos focales en las que participe sean grabados en audio. (Usted puede participar en la investigación sin necesidad de autorizar esto)</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Autorizo a que la investigadora tome notas de las entrevistas y/o grupos focales</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Estoy de acuerdo con el uso de citas anónimas o pseudónimos.</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Estoy de acuerdo en participar solo en una entrevista y/o grupo focal</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Estoy de acuerdo en participar en entrevistas adicionales y/o grupos focales en caso que surjan importantes preguntas que merezcan seguimiento o profundización (Usted puede participar en la investigación sin necesidad de autorizar esto)</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>En caso que decida retirarse del estudio, estoy de acuerdo en que la información provista por mi hasta ese punto pueda ser usada en la investigación</td>
<td>Sí</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nombre del participante: [Nombre]
Fecha: [Fecha]

Nombre de la persona que toma el consentimiento: [Nombre]
Fecha: [Fecha]

### Consentimiento y Asentimiento Informado (Menores de edad)
Investigación: Niñez, minería de oro y presencia de grupos armados en Colombia.

Si usted está de acuerdo con que el/la menor de edad que se encuentra bajo su cargo, participe del proyecto de investigación, por favor lea y conteste cada una de las preguntas dispuestas en este formato antes de que usted y el/la menor de edad lo firmen. Si usted no entiende alguna pregunta, tiene alguna duda o requiere información adicional, por favor pregunte directamente a la investigadora:

Por favor marque con una X

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Confirme que soy el cuidador/padre/madre del menor de edad que hará parte de la investigación</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Confirme que he leído, o se me ha leído en voz alta, la hoja de información del proyecto arriba mencionado, he tenido la oportunidad de examinar la información y hacer preguntas que han sido respondidas satisfactoriamente.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Entiendo que la participación del/la menor de edad a mi cargo en el estudio es voluntaria y que él/ella es libre de retirarse, después que el consentimiento es concedido y de manera previa a la fecha de publicación, sin dar una razón y sin perjuicio de ningún tratamiento/servicio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Autorizo a que las actividades creativas (como creaciones artísticas, teoría en áreas seguras, creación de mapas, narraciones y dibujos) y conversaciones sostenidas con el/la menor de edad a mi cargo en el marco de la investigación sean grabadas en audio. (El/la menor de edad a su cargo puede participar en la investigación sin necesidad de autorizar esto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Autorizo a que la investigadora tome notas de las actividades creativas y conversaciones en las que haga parte el/la menor de edad a mi cargo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Autorizo a que la investigadora tome fotografías de las actividades y del/la menor de edad a mi cargo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Estoy de acuerdo con el uso de citas anónimas o pseudónimos para referirme al/la menor de edad a mi cargo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Estoy de acuerdo en que el/la menor de edad que se encuentra bajo mi cargo participe solo en una sesión del proyecto de investigación arriba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nombre</td>
<td>fecha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana Patricia Wongen</td>
<td>28.01.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nombre del participante</td>
<td>Fecha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Echuyen Flores Wongen</td>
<td>13 años</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nombre del niño/a que está de acuerdo en participar</td>
<td>Edad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Corina Suenas</td>
<td>27.01.2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nombre de la persona que toma el consentimiento</td>
<td>Fecha</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Este proyecto de investigación ha sido aprobado por el Comité Ético de la Universidad de Manchester [16338].

Las autodefensas gaitanistas de Colombia, con el propósitio de mantener el orden social y a petición de varios habitantes de Quibdó, notando el desorden de jóvenes desafatados y peligrosos que solo se dedican a robar, herir y matar a personas de bien que se ganan el Plato de comida con sudor, esfuerzo y lágrimas. Nos vemos en la obligación de hacer una pequeñas jornada de limpieza social en la ciudad apartir de las 9pm, desde el día lunes 3 a el sábado 8 de abril. la limpieza se realizará en los siguientes barrios de la ciudad:
1. toda la zona norte
2. margaritas chicharonal
3. rosales
4. cahi
5. las Palmas
6. horizonte
7. playita
8. niño Jesus
9. san Vicente
10. san Judas
11. bonanza
12. cano
13. paraiso
14. ciudadela mia
15. Kennedy
16. obapo
17. uribe
18. poblado
PEDIMOS DISCULPA SI ALGUN INOCENTE CAE

Próximamente estaremos ajuciando a otros Barrios

No se trata de general miedo, sino de sober, se trata de que las persona puedan salir de su casa o de sus lugares de trabajo si la preocupación de que les vayan hacer algún daño.

Montañas de Colombia