



CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SIERRA LEONE'S PEACE-BUILDING PROCESS

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Following the holding of elections in May 2002, Sierra Leone has embarked on a process of peace-building. While facing multiple challenges, the country's youthful population is one that certainly deserves greater attention. Youths comprise more than 50% of Sierra Leone's population and in the face of scarce economic opportunities in a country devastated by war; they are a segment of the population that must be incorporated into the post-conflict reconstruction processes currently underway. This article is based on field trips by both authors to Sierra Leone in 2002.

Introduction

Sierra Leone has one of the world's youngest populations, with youths comprising more than 50% of the country's population.¹ Eleven years of devastating civil war subjected youth in Sierra Leone to different forms of trauma—youth were both the perpetrators and victims of the extreme violence that tore apart the country. This history poses complex challenges for sustained peace and socio-economic development of the country as it moves into a post-conflict peace-building process.

The involvement of youth in the politics of violence in Sierra Leone has its roots in that country's political past. The mobilisation of

youth in politics was a strategic move that targeted the group that was arguably most affected by decades of economic decline and social degradation. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities between the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the government in 1991, Sierra Leone's youth were already facing prospects of an uncertain future due to a combination of factors.

Years of corruption, a patrimonial economy based in Freetown that benefited the country's elite, neglect of the country side, collapsed infrastructure, chronic and ever rising unemployment levels, and general collapse of the education system all combined to lead many people to believe that only a violent over-

throw of such a corrupt system will improve their lives. The youth, most of them students, were at the forefront of this struggle.²

The involvement of youth in the politics of violence in Sierra Leone raises a number of issues as it does in many societies where children and youth have been involved in conflict. The first issue is that children and youth are used in conflicts in a political way only to be marginalized later and relegated in to an apolitical sphere, especially during and after the peace process. Despite having been hailed as a United Nations (UN) success story, the Sierra Leone case is, like many, a case of lost opportunity to improve the social, economic and political lives of children and youth.

As Sierra Leone continues on the route to recovery and rehabilitation, many believe that addressing the unique needs of the youth should be given priority if the country is to avoid that group being marginalized and potential resorting to violent forms of political articulation of their demands. The recent attacks on an army barracks on 13 January 2003 has served to raised more fears about the sustainability of the security situation in the country.³

This article focuses on the politicisation and abuse of children and youth in the Sierra Leone conflict and the resulting marginalisation of these two groups since the cessation of hostilities. Considering the Sierra Leone case and its route from conflict to negotiated peace, the article will argue that the country's experience demonstrates that children and youth are used (both as perpetrators and victims) as 'political currency' in conflicts and are not adequately protected by international law.

This lack of protection is manifest in most peace processes where issues of the role of children and youth is manipulated during negotiations in order to give legitimacy to belligerent parties (i.e. the RUF gained some legitimacy through the release of child soldiers) only to have the same groups relegated to an apolitical humanitarian sphere during demilitarisation, demobilisation and reintegration processes (DDR) and subsequently throughout the peace-building phase.

Some of this depoliticisation of children and youth (who were not so long ago been at the

centre of a political conflict and consequently influenced political change in the society) happens during the voting process. In most countries the age of universal suffrage is 18. Therefore during many post-conflict transition processes children and youth become politically marginalized in a process that they helped give birth to and often feel they are entitled to influence.⁴ Although conflict can open more local space for youth to articulate their demands and influence the politics of the country such space is narrow and requires nurturing. The lack of thought to these facts results in further marginalisation that perpetuates the cycle of marginalisation and provokes resort to violent expressions.

The article first provides a background on the involvement of children and youth in the politics of violence in Sierra Leone. This is done in order to illustrate how children and youth occupy a very important political space during conflicts and how such space inevitably narrows during the peace process.

The second section specifically deals with the definition of the role of children and youth (as a humanitarian apolitical category) by referring to international conventions and agreements applicable to Sierra Leone. Here reference will be made to how peace processes within the framework of the United Nations often perpetuate a vicious cycle (by either default or design) of neglect, marginalisation, underdevelopment and political abuse of children and youth during after conflict. Lastly, the article provides a brief overview of Sierra Leone's peace-building challenges provided for by the experience of children and youth and possible solutions that can help promote the sustainability of the fragile peace the country currently enjoys.

Children and youth in violence in Sierra Leone

It is obvious that as the group that constitutes a majority of Sierra Leone's population, children and youth are the most affected by political and economic issues affecting the country. Decades of corruption, neglect, environmental decline, bad governance and economic decline resulted in resentment from

the groups and regions that felt marginalized by a corrupt elite in Freetown.

The resort to violence as a form of political expression in the country was due to a, “patrimonial state running out of resources (especially resources to support education), emergence of rural slums in diamond districts, and the agrarian failures of an urban- (and mining) biased development policy.”⁵ Nothing suggests any vigorous movement to reverse this situation in the country. For example, in diamond mining areas the government has not yet succeeded in exerting its authority and control over mineral extraction.

As Sierra Leone continues on the route to recovery and rehabilitation, many believe that addressing the unique needs of the youth should be given priority if the country is to avoid that group becoming marginalized again and potentially resorting to violent forms of political articulation of their demands. Political marginalisation also contributed to the dynamic of war in Sierra Leone. One youth testified that:

I used to live near Serabu with my parents when the town was attacked in 1997 and captured by the RUF. I was taken to Makeni, where I was trained by my commander and given a two pistol grip gun. I was injected with cocaine twice. We used to loot, rape girls and burn houses. ... The older generation has to give way to the young people so that they will have a chance to be exposed to facilities and jobs, especially in the political sphere.⁶

Dealing with the issue of youth rehabilitation and reintegration in post-conflict situations in the context of peace-building poses distinct challenges. In the case of Sierra Leone, the urgent need to rehabilitate infrastructure is more appealing to donors and is given priority by government at the expense of a focus on youth rehabilitation. The concept of ‘youth rehabilitation’ as a category might not seem appealing to donors but failure to deal with the healing of the youth and reorientate them as different and responsible citizens obeying the laws that govern the country will have serious future consequences for the country.

The children and youth of Sierra Leone had eleven years of their lives taken from

them. Some youth perceive themselves as war criminals that are shunned by society. Further stigmatisation and social and economic marginalisation could increase their resentment of society. Rebuilding infrastructure, while important, cannot address these issues of marginalisation. In fact the question must be asked: What is the point in building schools, clinics and if the youth have no sense of ownership or responsibility towards them and destroy them again? The need is to provide Sierra Leone with ‘soft security’ by repairing the souls of the youth.⁷

The other problem in dealing with youth issues during demobilisation and after, relates to the issue of categorisation. At the end of the war, most agencies were concerned about the rehabilitation of child soldiers. The problem of defining youth as opposed to children in societies emerging from conflict has had serious consequences for policy formulation and programme design. The blurred lines between youth and children have resulted in the neglect of youth, who were demobilised as adults during Sierra Leone’s DDR programme. This means that some of their specific needs for things such as therapy for trauma suffered during early years of recruitment are neglected. This points to a failing of the international system, as unlike children who are protected by international law, youth occupy a legal grey area. It is due to this grey area that vulnerability of youth becomes a vicious cycle during conflict, the peace process and after the war is over.

In Sierra Leone little attention was focused on those who joined fighting as children and were discharged as adults. Post-war youth in Sierra Leone need to learn life skills in addition to livelihood skills. Life skills means giving the youth multi-purpose capabilities that will ensure that they become complete citizens with psychological, intellectual and social skills that allows them to survive in society. This will involve political will and a commitment to provide resources for all those concerned. More importantly, such an approach will require working with the donor community to change some of the focus in their funding and realise that Sierra Leone has a challenge of re-orientating its youthful population to new ways of living and behaviour.

The challenge of dealing with youth issues means there is an urgent need to build on government's recognition that youth are a special group that need attention and resources committed to their cause and concerns. So far there have been few resources committed to the realisation of this goal. Political will on the part of government needs to be backed up by concrete action. The prolonged neglect and lack of governmental commitment might be perceived as the continuation of indifference to the needs of the youth that has characterised previous governments in Sierra Leone. Although it is fair to say that the government does recognise the youth problem, a clear strategy and commitment to address the issue is still being developed.

However, dealing with the issue of youth as a category has its own limitations and problems. Chief amongst these is the issue of labelling and the consequences it has had for post-war Sierra Leone. Since the peace process that ended the war in Sierra Leone recognised early the need to disarm those involved in the fighting and ensure that they were given proper support in order to enable them to re-enter civilian life and become productive members of society many people have used (and mis-used) the label 'ex-combatant' to gain privileged status in society.

In Sierra Leone there has been manipulation of labels such as 'ex-combatant' by people in order to get political concessions at the expense of the entire society. One way of dealing with this problem is to sensitise young people to define themselves as youth, rather than perceiving themselves as ex-RUF or Civil Defence Force (CDF) combatants. The question is, can one be ex-combatant and youth at the same time? Becoming more youth than ex-combatant will mean that the youth view the war as an unfortunate history of their lives rather than a social badge they wear with pride and use to keep society hostage.

The problem in Sierra Leone is the disproportional concentration of youth in selected violence prone areas such as Makeni. Areas such as Makeni became rebel strongholds precisely because of government marginalisation and perceived alienation by the youth and other members of these communities. As one youth leader put it:

Congo town community is at a disadvantage. It is one of the most depressing areas in the whole locality and a suburb with a lot of amenities lacking. When there is help from the government we are always left behind. We need good drinking water. We need food-that is, support to help us grow our own food to eat. We need house hold utensils, since this is the major base of the RUF in the whole of Makeni. We need agricultural inputs. We need our schools to be rebuilt. We need a clinic/health centre. Only MSF-Medicine San Frontiers-helps with a mobile clinic. We need a market centre. We need a youth centre. Our economic base has been devastated. Micro-credit for our women folk. Help with a store/drying floor. Training centre on skills for middle level manpower need of the country. Keep in mind that this community suffered severely from the recently concluded civil conflict.⁸

The above statement might read like an inventory of unreasonable demands whilst in fact it shows that the combatants were aware of their plight, its causes, possible remedies and the role of youth in it. The same leader put the case for the youth thus:

This community is virtually empty of amenities and job opportunities for the youth. When we returned all our houses had been vandalised. Our thriving agricultural efforts have been looted or destroyed. Our domestic poultry have also been looted. Our drinking streams have been polluted. People now use nearby bushes to defecate. In all, people have to pinch and scrape to survive. It is this pinching and scrapping that led to the war in the first place.⁹

Without any doubt the government of Sierra Leone is faced with enormous challenges that will take decades to solve but there is more pressure to address the underlying socio-economic grievances of places such as Makeni and ensure that any opportunities aimed at rehabilitation of infrastructure and the economy benefits the youth of these areas.

Failure to do so will result in the formation of organisations such as the Movement for

Concerned Kono Youth (MOCKY) developed as platforms aimed at articulating the needs of the youth with the potential of becoming political and social movements.

MOCKY was formed to articulate the grievances of youth in the Kono region and channelling their energies in a constructive way. MOCKY has been credited with playing a very positive role in consolidating the peace in the area through mediation of disputes. Other organisations such as YOSUPA (Youth for Sustainable Development) another local youth NGO involved with peace projects immediately after the end of the war reflect the dynamism and potential energy of young people to take responsibility of the future of Sierra Leone. It is this energy that needs to be nurtured and resources provided for the development of the young people of Sierra Leone in order for peace to be sustainable.

Children and youth during the peace process

Negotiations to produce a lasting peaceful solution to Sierra Leone's eleven-year-old war resulted in unprecedented events that will influence international peace developments for years to come. The 1999 Lomé Agreement, for the first time, made provision for dealing with issues related to children and youth and established the office for children's protector. Children and youth were to be treated differently during and after the DDR process.

Article XXX of the 1999 Lomé Agreement declared that:

The Government shall accord particular attention to the issue of child soldiers. It shall, accordingly, mobilise resources, both within and from the International Community, and especially through the Office of the UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, UNICEF and other agencies, to address the special needs of these children in the existing disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes.

Subsequent agreements made provision for the establishment of the UN Officer for the Protection of Children. This unprecedented move in UN peacekeeping missions was

intended to ensure that the needs of children and youth were taken care of during and after the peace process.

The concern for children in armed conflict and peacemaking processes was highlighted by the 1996 Machel Report.¹⁰ Part IV of the Report entitled 'Integrating the protection of children into peacemaking and peacekeeping':

Children have often been overlooked in peacemaking processes, and the price of this neglect is becoming painfully clear. Without specific references to children during peace negotiations, post-conflict programmes and resources will not be adequately allocated to meet children's needs.¹¹

The peace process provides an opportunity to negotiate a new political dispensation that can protect vulnerable minority groups. It is unfortunate that this space and opportunity is not used adequately to improve the protection of children and youth by holding the political parties to higher standards that they will be obligated to respect in the post-conflict situation.

An additional section, entitled 'Integrating the protection of children into United Nations Peacekeeping Operations' states:

To ensure the implementation of the child protection dimension of the mandates of Peacekeeping operations and to advise the head of the peacekeeping mission in a given country, the Security Council has adopted the proposal that Senior Child Protection Advisors be deployed with peacekeeping operations.¹²

This provision was also influenced by the fact that personnel working as part of UN peacekeeping missions have been reported to have subjected children to abuse.

Once it was clear that the war in Sierra Leone was subsiding, a number of donor programmes aimed at generally mitigating the impact of war on the people of Sierra Leone were initiated. Some of these projects targeted selected groups prioritised as worst hit by the war. There are still current projects for special groups such as amputees and the ongoing reintegration of ex-combatants.

However short-term donor assistance has focused primarily on the rehabilitation of

infrastructure (e.g. clinics, schools and roads) and such development was initially given priority by the government at the expense of a focus on youth rehabilitation. However, longer-term assistance should focus increasingly on the broader concepts of youth rehabilitation, incorporated into a 'soft security' approach. The former should aim at dedicating resources to the youth as a vital category in society whilst the latter should focus on targeting the 'soul' of youth in Sierra Leone.

Both of these approaches are important for various reasons. Firstly, the youth (and adult population) of Sierra Leone had eleven years of their lives taken away from them and were subjected to (and in some cases committed) dehumanising forms of violence. However, in Sierra Leone, the analytical problem of categorising the youth in societies emerging from conflict is the blurred lines between children and youth. In Sierra Leone many were 'recruited' (forcible or otherwise) as children and spent many more than ten years fighting, committing atrocities associated with war and generally being exposed to extreme violence.

At the end of the war international and national humanitarian and development assistance organisations were concerned with the rehabilitation of 'child soldiers' rather than focusing on broader categories of youth. This focus is often misplaced. Firstly, in Sierra Leone as elsewhere, little attention was focused on those who joined fighting as children and discharged as adults. These children were recruited and subjected to extreme forms of violence with serious psychological consequences that would influence their personal growth for the rest of their lives.

This group thus has special needs, as do many other groups affected by war in the country. There seems to be an apparent failure on the part of the international community (and many others involved including the government of Sierra Leone), especially UN agencies to recognise the dynamic impact of exposure to extreme violence on the lives of children later demobilised as youth.

Although the UNAMSIL mission, international agencies in general and the government of Sierra Leone have been rightly credited with success in bringing Sierra Leone from

years of conflict to peace, there has been a failure to design appropriate policies to cater for the majority of the country's population, the youth. The UN mission has certainly succeeded in turning the situation in Sierra Leone towards a peaceful transition. Many people involved with the mission have repeatedly voiced concern about the thousands of 'idle youth' prone to violence and without any prospects in life. They worry that these youth present a security threat if their future and needs are not taken care of. They fear that youth might easily destabilise the country. These concerns are genuine if one considers that historically youth have been a target for mobilization in Sierra Leone's conflicts.

Youth and challenges of peace-building

The end of UNAMSIL's peacekeeping phase that culminated in the May 2002 elections opened up a more challenging phase for the Sierra Leone peace process. As illustrated above, the major challenge is to ensure that efforts aimed at rebuilding the country impact upon and improve the lives of the majority of Sierra Leone citizens, namely the youth.

One of the major causes for marginalized groups to resort to violence as a means of political articulation result from lack of dialogue between those groups and those in authority. This has been the case in Sierra Leone. The youth have felt marginalized and not given a proper platform to influence decision making that affects their lives. Most youth in places such as Makeni were of the opinion that before the war they were hardly involved (if at all) in decision making in their communities. The positive outcome of the war was that it made people in positions of authority in government and the community realise that without involving the youth in social and political life there is no way peace could be sustained.

The Ministry of Youth and Sport has identified the establishment a 'Youth Radio' as a platform where youth will be involved in the development of programmes and be able to articulate their needs without interference, as well as convey their views on the future of Sierra Leone. The idea is that the pro-

grammes should not focus on the past and lament history but on the rediscovery of 'youthness' and give the youth back their worth. This can take form of promoting youth talent and exporting it by tapping into such art forms as the unique 'Bubu music'.

The Ministry has also identified the need to promote more dialogue between the youth and political authorities and has suggested the formation of a 'Youth Council' that will meet twice every year and is representative of the whole of Sierra Leone with the aim of minimizing the political risk of marginalizing the youth.

In addition, lost opportunities to deal adequately with the issue of children and youth during the peace process could be renegotiated during the peace-building phase. The youth of Sierra Leone need to be given more political space (as they occupied during the war) to articulate their needs and be provided with enough opportunities to make them responsible citizens. These efforts must include the provision of socio-economic development opportunities in order to decrease the high levels of marginalisation that exist in the country.

It should not be forgotten that it was the same marginalisation that led youth to become involved in violent politics. At the moment there are unsubstantiated allegations that some former combatants from Sierra Leone are already fighting along side the LURD rebels in Liberia. If true, this reflects a continuation of the politics of violence in the minds of some Sierra Leone youths. Therefore, the issue of youth needs serious and urgent attention.

Conclusion

The peacemaking, peacekeeping and now peace-building mission in Sierra Leone has achieved tremendous successes. The UNAMSIL mission undoubtedly achieved many successes that culminated in Sierra Leone declared disarmed and elections held in a relatively peaceful environment. However, many challenges remain as the country has entered the peace-building phase. Some of these challenges reflect deficiencies of the Sierra Leone

peacemaking and peacekeeping phases of the peace process.

With youth comprising more than 50 per cent of Sierra Leone's population, the neglect of some of the needs of this section of the population will have serious consequences in the sustenance of peace in the country. Although the establishment of the Child Protection Office during the UNAMSIL mission was major step forward there has been neglect of children and youth needs during the Sierra Leone peace process.

It has been argued here that although children have some form of legal protection through international human rights law, there has been a failure to adequately implement this protection. The situation is worse when the issue of youth is considered. Youth form part of a grey definitional and legal area that consequently results in them not being adequately protected during all phases of the peace process.

During the DDR process the assumption is that focus should be on providing humanitarian support to ex-child soldiers and only material support to youth ex-combatants (the same provided to adults). This overlooks the fact that most of those who get demobilised as youth were recruited as children and suffered years of abuse and thus have unique needs. They are simply provided with vocational training without any direct form of further support, such as psychological consultation. Depression and feelings of neglect by society are increasing amongst the youth in Sierra Leone as they find themselves shunned by society and not provided with opportunities to earn a living by the government. This situation is a serious potential threat to the sustainability of Sierra Leone's fragile peace and needs to be addressed urgently.

Notes

1. P Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*, 1996.
2. Ibid, p. 51.
3. Accessed from <www.sierraleone.net>
4. This article uses the universally accepted definition of youth as being those between 15 and 35 whilst children are those under 14.
5. Paul Richards, op. cit., p. 51-52.

6. Paul aged 12, interviewed by Ambrose James in March 2000, in *First Stages on the road to peace: the Abidjan process (1995–96)*, Lansana Gberie, [http: www.c-r.org/accord/s-leone/accord9/first.htm](http://www.c-r.org/accord/s-leone/accord9/first.htm).
7. Interview with Sierra Leone Minister of Sports and Youth, Dr. Dennis Bright, Freetown, 21 August 2002.
8. Interview with D Bright
9. Ibid
10. The United Nations commissioned Graca Machel to undertake a study that will show the impact of war and violence on children.
11. G Machel, *Children and armed conflict*, section A, paragraph 48.
12. Ibid, paragraph 52.