

## CHAPTER 3

### “THE YOUTH PROBLEM”

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“People say that we’re a problem, but they don’t know our problems. My uncle raped me when I was 12 and I joined the rebels because I thought it would be better having sex with strangers instead of people in my family. Now the war is over, we have put down our guns, and I am working as a prostitute because I can’t get another job. No one really cares about us.”

-Young prostitute in Freetown

“I think we cannot keep having the international community saying, ‘The youth is a problem,’ but then you pump money into another area.”

-Dennis Bright, Minister of Youth

#### **An Entrenched Social and Economic Status Quo**

Pujehun District lies in the south of Sierra Leone. It borders the Atlantic Ocean in the southwest, Liberia to the southeast, Kenema district to the northeast, Bo to the north and Bonthe to the west. It occupies a total space of 4,105 square kilometres and has twelve chiefdoms. The main ethnic groups are Mende, Vai, Temne and Sherbro. Main economic activities include diamond mining, fishing, and coffee and cocoa plantations. The district is predominantly Muslim.

A forthcoming report from an NGO called Rehabilitation and Development Agency in Sierra Leone (RADA-SL) contains the results of a survey on the prevalence and effects of child labour in three sections of the Soro Gbema Chiefdom in Pujehun. The sections assessed included Massaquoi II, Mano River and Kemokai, all of which are at-risk areas for child abuse and exploitation because of proximity to the Liberian border and isolation from the formal economy. The survey was carried out in September 2004 in ten of the eleven villages in the Kemokai section, and in the army garrison at the outskirts of Jendema. A total of 543 questionnaires were administered, with 543 different respondents of varying genders and ages.

RADA-SL Survey Areas and Respondents <sup>26</sup>										
Name of survey area/village	No. of questionnaires	Age								
		10-24			25-34			35-55		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Jendema	245	35	80	115	27	60	87	13	30	43
Malema	73	13	22	35	10	16	26	5	7	12
Gohn	52	9	15	24	7	12	19	4	5	9
Malema Junction	12	3	4	7	1	2	3	1	1	2
Kalia 1	22	5	6	11	3	4	7	2	2	4
Kalia 2	20	5	5	10	3	3	6	2	2	4
Kabila	6	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	2
Malomei	23	5	6	11	4	4	8	2	2	4
Melimei	23	6	5	11	4	4	8	2	2	4
Bombohun	32	5	10	15	4	8	12	2	3	5
Military Garrison	35	5	1	6	18	2	20	9	–	9
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>98</b>

During the war, the District Recovery Committee report estimates that 4,200 people fled from Soro Gbema chiefdom into Liberia. Many spontaneously returned, with others assisted by UNHCR.<sup>27</sup> Even after the disarmament process, there is a heavy presence of small arms and light weapons in border towns, and the area is affected by instability on the Liberian side. Namibian UN peacekeeping troops and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebels are present on the Liberian side of the Mano River Bridge. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) recruitment for Sierra Leone was heavy in this area. Today, apart from farming, people in Kemokai section depend heavily on cross-border trade. According to RADA-SL's report, children are used to transport illegal goods, including drugs:

Due to the level of poverty, high rate of illiteracy and the lack of adequate educational facilities for children coupled with the proximity of an international border and the Atlantic Ocean, which connects to the rest of the world, there is a great potential for child trafficking in the area.<sup>28</sup>

Up to 70 per cent of young girls between 10 and 15 years of age admitted to having unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners. Less than five per cent had even heard of family planning or safe sex. They cited LURD rebels and UN peacekeepers across the Mano River Bridge as frequent customers who trade cash or looted property in return for sex. A common LURD slogan was repeated several times: "I fired for it, you lie down for it." Boys in the same age bracket are primarily used as mules to transport illicit goods across the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone, although they are also sometimes sexually exploited. Both boys and girls are trafficked to Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire to be sold as prostitutes, drug pushers, house help, farmers, baby sitters, factory workers, and cleaners.

A twelve-year old girl named Adama told the survey team that her uncle had sold her to traffickers who took her to Monrovia without her consent. Her father died during the civil war and her mother was not told about the decision. She said, "I have been baby sitting and at the same time exploited sexually by my madam's husband for two years." She ran away and returned home in 2003 when Monrovia came under rebel attack. Her story is not unusual.<sup>29</sup>

The purpose of RADA-SL's study is to motivate funding for a project to strengthen primary education and establish school-based child advocacy and awareness raising campaigns. However, the conditions that are the focus of the study's concern have wider implications; in a country where the youth have been both feared and demonised for their role as fighters in the civil war, "the youth problem" is the most widely recognised threat to the sustainability of peace. At-risk children and youth are used not only to fight wars, but also to traffic in weapons, drugs, and other dangerous contraband. A Sierra Leone Police Local Unit Commander in Freetown has focused community policing on forging positive partnerships with the youth in his area:

Small arms and light weapons are still in our midst post-DDR. Anyone who says otherwise is a liar. Maybe there are not enough to destabilise the country, but there are enough to go out and commit armed robbery. SLP needs to step up our strategy. Some ex-combatants still have arms and an agenda. They are not used to a conventional way of making a life. Ex-combatants have reintegrated so well that it's hard to track them, but when we see AK-47s in crime, we know it must be by people who know how to use them. If the economy improves quickly, that would be the best deterrent to people using firearms.

For a long time, we considered youth to be drug abusers, behind crime – they were stigmatised. They were left out in the cold. Now

we are reaching out to 120 youth organisations and social clubs, with fifty to a hundred people each, in our Division communities. We have formed an umbrella youth organisation with [UN] Civil Affairs and Dennis Bright [Minister of Youth]. Security and development are bedfellows. The partnership between the SLP and the youth is meant to emphasise that. With UNAMSIL leaving, there are not enough police to be available at every corner of society. We need to work with the community and the youth to provide security. This relationship building will lead to education on things like domestic violence and firearms use and misuse.

When asked what types of activities or programmes should be prioritised to build security and sustain peace, he said:

There are slum areas in our division, with factories all around. They are difficult to work with and penetrate the community, where there is a culture of poverty. This needs bigger intervention, for drug use and building values of employment. Teaching civic education in schools is important. We must help the youth to learn the constitution, to give people a stake in the future as politicians, police officers, or civil servants.<sup>30</sup>

Kono's Chief Administrator, Mrs. Alice Torto, asserted that the biggest security threat in Kono (famous for the diamond mining that drew rebels to take over and hold the area during the civil war) is "unemployed youth."<sup>31</sup> Libraries and resource centres are at the top of the District's security agenda, to keep youth busy. In Koidu town, there is a nightclub called Richmond's where Mrs. Torto says "they smoke cannabis and have no place to sleep, so they stay there." Visits to Richmond's confirmed this account, with girls as young as 13 working as prostitutes at the bar. Some said their relatives had been killed in the war; several said they had been raped and drugged by rebels and could not get married anyway; others gave the typical story about how prostitution was the best way to earn a living. Business, however, did not seem booming in Koidu on one particular Thursday night, when after dancing with each other for over an hour and failing to attract customers, the girls sat down at a table in the corner and fell asleep with their heads in their hands.

## Defining Youth

The question becomes not whether there is a "youth problem" (clearly there are many, from unemployment to prostitution to HIV/AIDS) but whether this

Liberia Demographics <sup>32</sup>	
<b>Population:</b>	3,390,635 (July 2004 est.)
<b>Age structure:</b>	0-14 years: 43.4% (male 742,508; female 730,677) 15-64 years: 52.9% (male 875,951; female 918,570) 65 years and over: 3.6% (male 61,867; female 61,062) (2004 est.)
<b>Median age:</b>	total: 18.1 years male: 17.7 years female: 18.4 years (2004 est.)

Sierra Leone Demographics <sup>33</sup>	
<b>Population:</b>	5,883,889 (July 2004 est.)
<b>Age structure:</b>	0-14 years: 44.8% (male 1,291,621; female 1,343,827) 15-64 years: 52% (male 1,458,610; female 1,599,109) 65 years and over: 3.2% (male 91,232; female 99,490) (2004 est.)
<b>Median age:</b>	total: 17.5 years male: 17.2 years female: 17.8 years (2004 est.)

amorphous catch-all phrase can actually be narrowed down to a specific security threat now that the war is over. Although one could easily argue that youth pose a threat to stability based on existing fear of their participation and even leadership in the recently-ended civil war, doing so would undermine the complexity of a situation that goes beyond demographics to encompass a shifting set of social and economic mores, desires, and relationships.

“Youth” can be broadly defined as anyone between the ages of 15 and 35, and occasionally people over 35 who are not married or financially independent. Data from most Sub-Saharan African countries suggest that over half of the population is under the age of 18, and continent-wide it is estimated that half the population is under the age of 15.<sup>34</sup> In *Young Africa*, Nicolas Argenti addresses the changing definitions of youth and culture, pointing out that we should question conceptions of youth that have changed dramatically from pre-colonial times to the post-modern, globalised world. While there is a huge diversity of cultures and traditions that vary from region to region, some factors remain constant. In most rural societies, young men and women were (and often still are) subject to the control of male elders. The definition of youth that stretches into the mid-thirties age range and beyond reflects the fact that:

Men were not classified as ‘children’ as a result of their biological age, but rather because they had not achieved the level of economic

importance that would permit them to acquire wives, build their own compounds, and become economically viable agents. Childhood thus refers to a position in a social hierarchy more than it does to biological age... The category 'youth' is therefore a moveable feast, a category used by different interest groups to define ever-shifting groups of people.<sup>35</sup>

One participant in a youth focus group in Sierra Leone defined youth as "between the ages of 15 and 35, but if you are older, even if you have nothing, you are still a youth. If you are living very well, and you have money, even if you are young, we start calling you 'pa' and you leave the group." As several theorists have noted, the youth population can no longer be categorised as a marginal sub-group of society. However, donors and governments continue, at their own peril, to plan programmes and solicit funding without a mainstream approach to politically empowering and including youth. Young people are frequently denied agency as pawns or victims of more 'legitimate' power structures:

The phenomenon of children participating in violent conflicts has generally been viewed as a by-product of clashes between real conflict stakeholders (governments and armed insurgents, for example), much in the same way as happy, healthy, educated children are seen as a collateral benefit of peaceful, functional and prosperous states.<sup>36</sup>

While youth are clearly vulnerable in ways that adults are not, they continue to become empowered by access to information and resources that change their expectations based on a more global view of political, participation, consumerism, and power. Dennis Bright, Minister of Youth in Sierra Leone, challenged his colleagues:

Just go and do a small study on the nicknames [of ex-combatant youth]. Then you know how connected they are. Some of them are Beckham, others are Ronaldo, others are Rambo, others are Tupac, others are Notorious B.I.G. in a very remote corner of a village. To me, this is an indicator that these people know more than you think. They are not desperately rural and backward young people anymore.<sup>37</sup>

This new connectedness is often portrayed as threatening, and it is. Information has the power to mobilise change, and when the status quo still reflects child labour, abuse, and trafficking, the idea that children will find ways to fight for their own rights (or be co-opted by external forces

with promises of empowerment) can be scary. Argenti summarises the two extremes of youth portrayal:

While African governments may tentatively sing the praises of youth as the ‘promise of the future,’ they equally often fear them as the source of today’s instability. Two stereotypes have thus simultaneously emerged, one portraying youth as ‘heroes,’ the other as ‘villains.’

In terms of policy development, these stereotypes are reflected in a split-personality donor and government approach that tends to hype the threat of violent youth when it comes to the criminal justice system or politically repressive measures, and yet under-fund or ignore solutions that would positively empower young people to use their power for economic or social advancement. There is a general failure to recognise that the same power and ingenuity used to fight wars can and should be harnessed to prevent them.

### **Children, Youth, and Small Arms**

By the United Nations definition, small arms include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machine guns. Light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held under barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles (sometimes mounted), portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems (sometimes mounted) and mortars of calibres less than 100mm; ammunition and explosives includes cartridges from small arms, shells and missiles for light weapons, mobile containers with missiles or shells for single action anti-aircraft and anti-tank systems, anti-personnel and anti-tank hand grenades, landmines and explosives.<sup>38</sup> All of these are light, durable, and technically operable by children. Fieldwork by the ISS in 2002 in Sierra Leone demonstrated children’s training and familiarity with small arms and light weapons gained due to association with the RUF, CDF, or the Sierra Leone Army.

Because of the way both warfare and demographics have changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, children and youth are increasingly becoming both perpetrators and victims of instability, whether manifested as crime or civil war, or some combination of the two. The major “threat” cited so often in Sierra Leone and Liberia is less focused on youth as soldiers and more on the possibility of a growing criminal element like Kono’s prostitutes and Freetown’s drug pushers.

Weapons Expertise among Child Combatants in Sierra Leone		
Weapon	Children Trained (out of 48 interviewed)	Percentage of Sample
Pistol	17	28.2
Sub machine gun	10	20.8
AK47 and other assault rifles	36	75.0
Light machine gun	4	0.8
Heavy machine gun	3	0.6
Rocket-propelled grenade launcher (RPG)	8	16.6
Mortar	1	0.02
Flame thrower	2	0.04

Source: *Institute for Security Studies, field research conducted in Sierra Leone, January 2002.*

Small arms policy, particularly in post-conflict contexts like Sierra Leone and Liberia, needs to shift to a longer-term approach that avoids a 'damage-control' mentality to guns and crime and begins to acknowledge the constructive political force that young people can bring to the table if given the opportunities to do so. Small arms proliferation in West Africa, particularly the Mano River Union countries, relies on an economy that excludes the majority of youth from legitimate employment. However, it has been repeatedly shown that given the option to pursue non-violent livelihoods, young people will do so.

In mid-2004 while disarmament was ongoing, UNMIL reported that it had received reports from people living near the frontier in Liberia that guns used in Liberia's civil war were being traded in neighbouring countries for consumer goods such as bicycles and motorbikes.<sup>39</sup> This piece of information, though it only garnered three lines in the middle of a larger story, was corroborated by several respondents during the fieldwork in Monrovia and Daru (on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border). Many of the young men trading AK variants for motorbikes, in particular, hoped to use the bikes to start small businesses and earn money transporting people and goods locally near their homes. Argenti argues:

Given the chance, young people do not vent their frustration in the form of anarchic violence. On the contrary, all the evidence suggests that young people only become involved in warfare or other forms of violence as a rational choice in a zero option political and economic climate.<sup>40</sup>

Corroborating this point of view, a former youth activist and founder of a youth network in Freetown articulated the way Foday Sankoh's 'revolution' was initially welcomed in 1991 because of the desperate, "zero option political and economic climate" in Sierra Leone. Only after excessive brutality and the later amputation campaign did the popular tide begin to turn.

### ***On Youth, Corruption, and Violence: An Interview 8 November 2004***

We need to look at what happened in the war. All the things that happened in the past are still happening today. One of the outstanding reasons as to why the war took place was as a result of institutionalisation of corruption. Corruption became institutionalised under the APC [All People's Congress]. There was therefore a culture of apathy among the young people who felt that there was no kind of way forward for them. This was a period in which you had to belong to a particular tribe or you couldn't be in the military. There was a class system.

At that time, a lot of the young people who took up arms were purely agitating for an end to corruption. That is why the first set of people who formed opposition was from the colleges, educated. In 1977, the students were the first set of people to lead demonstrations for meaningful change. But then it became one of the bloodiest things ever. APC clamped down very hard on the opposition and a lot of students from the university left.

We had a decline in social conditions, and it is very natural that when you experience corruption, people will naturally agitate and demand a change. I remember after the reign of Siaka Stevens and then Momoh, during the era of Momoh, that was actually when things started going so bad. That was a period in which very close to two, three months the capital city was without electricity. For college students, most of the lectures and the classrooms became political. When I was in Bo school, even before the rebels attacked, we would say if there is a war we will join them. You know, I used to agitate. I was at that time, ready for change. This plan shows how desperate Sierra Leoneans were for change. When in 1991 Foday Sankoh made his first broadcast saying that they were going to attack Sierra Leone, it was welcome.

Despite the fact that many children and youth participated in the armed conflict in both Sierra Leone and Liberia (and continue to be a potentially

destabilising force in Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea), it also became clear through focus groups and interviews with youth groups that, as Argenti highlights, they have "rather conventional aspirations for their future lives." He continues:

They would like an education and a useful job. Like young people across the world, they rebel against their elders, ignore advice, and enjoy taking risks. In addition to poverty and the collapse of the state, the advent of the AIDS pandemic has shortened time horizons, narrowed expectations, and heightened risks. But, given the option, most young people would prefer a future of security and domesticity. It is striking how little research there is in this area.<sup>41</sup>

A focus group with male youth between the ages of 15 and 34 in Beh, a Freetown slum, revealed that participants' concerns were indeed along conventional lines. When asked about the state of peace in Sierra Leone, complaints ranged from the structure of shacks during the rainy season to the poor state of the economy, touching on politics only as it related to the day-to-day issues that determine quality of life. One participant said, "We have no education here, no schools, no medical care. There is no medicine if we get sick." Another added, "My wife, when she was pregnant, the rain overflows the house, and I have no way to get water out of the house, she is now sick with pneumonia. We live right on the sea, and there is no support for this community. The kids are not in school." Sewerage is also a problem: "There are no toilet facilities; we live with the smell, with only two or three toilets for everyone." When asked whose responsibility it is to provide health, water, and medical care, political party feuding was cited as the main problem:

We have two counsellors but there is no support from the government, because they are not from the ruling party; they are APC. They don't have any support because it is even a great problem, because they are not ruling party. The mayor of here is APC. So all those counsellors under the APC, they are marginalised and pushed into the corner and people don't have respect for them because they cannot deliver and provide support. We blame the ruling party for pushing down our counsellors.

The intersection of quality of life, youth image, and politics was filtered through the lens of justice and peace. One member of the group articulated a common opinion:

As for me, I believe that the peace is not concrete. The peace is really fragile. Because the entire country is blessed with minerals, given by

the Almighty. But it is only enjoyed by the privileged few. As for we down here, we are isolated. I hope you can walk around and see our shanty houses, and see our environment. We have no good medical facilities or living conditions. We have cholera, HIV/AIDS, all these diseases. I believe where there is peace, there must be justice. There is no justice in this land. Because if you are not fortunate to be elite, you will not reap the benefits of this country. This road, Lightfoot Boston Street, that road was constructed just to mock us. When they constructed that road, the water started to enter our houses during the rainy season. Our houses flood, the entire environment floods and we have no place to go. Our grandfathers, our fathers, they are here. And now we ourselves have our own children, we are living in this place. So if you are asking about the peace, I will tell you that the peace is not concrete because there is no justice in the land.

The identification of basic amenities and a decent standard of living as being central to the idea of a lasting peace corroborates similar views expressed in urban slums in and around Nairobi. In the Kenyan slum of Kasarani, a youth worker emphasised a broader view of peace, one shared by the young men in the same age group in Beh in a different region of the continent:

In peace building we ask when do we have peace? Is peace only the absence of war? Peace is very broad. When I am hungry, I am not at peace with myself. When I don't have shelter I am not at peace with myself. When there is insecurity outside even when I have a shelter and I am scared someone might come to kill me I am not at peace with myself... Before we started rubbish collection if you can remember, every now and then in our area we would find aborted children dumped everywhere. Here you are caring about humanity and you see a child who has been thrown away because there is a lot of garbage heaps. Imagine a dog just rotting outside your door? After we cleared these garbage heaps we do not even find a dog that has been thrown away in our neighbourhood. At least we have catered for peace within our environment.<sup>42</sup>

The difference between Kenya and Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa is that civil society is far less developed and equipped at the grassroots level to solve problems in the latter countries. Governments do not fare much better, operating on budgets that are only made viable by large amounts of donor support. In Sierra Leone, GDP per capita reached USD 142 in 2000. About 82 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line, and with a Gini Index of 66 in the same year, it had one of the most skewed income

distributions in the world. Since 1996, Sierra Leone has been ranked among the lowest in the UNDP Human Development Index, and is ranked bottom in the 2004 Index. Within this context, government priorities do not allow funding for programmes that are either outside donor agendas or beyond what can be categorised as meeting basic needs.

The way forward is in creatively linking funding for projects involving youth, poverty alleviation, and peace building. Education and 'cultural change' are the two areas where this seems most possible. A WANEP programme officer in Monrovia put it this way:

What we need most is education reform. We need to pay teachers and dedicate money to schools. We will change perceptions and culture, and then when someone does violence the alarm will be sounded. We have a failed, lost generation that allowed themselves to be used. Now they say, "I don't need to go to school to become a minister: I just need to hold a gun." We need to stop them from seeking that short cut.<sup>43</sup>

Sierra Leone's Minister of Youth Dennis Bright is an anomaly: a man with an NGO background in a national-level government position. In an extensive interview, he articulated the need for more support and communication between donors, Ministries, and civil society organisations. He also explained how the sustainability of peace in Sierra Leone might be dependent on whether he can get generators, deep-freezers and satellite television to the youth in remote corners of the country. He contends that youth are part of a new global awareness, tuned in to movies and messages from other parts of Africa and the West. While they retain some ties to traditional ways of doing things, they want the comforts and amenities available in urban areas. They want to watch football with their friends, with a cold drink in their hand, rather than be relegated to a rural area where they have no power, both literally and figuratively.

This view of things suggests that environmental factors are more important than demographics. Instead of looking at youth as a demographic demand driver, the focus should be on the environment in which that demographic is living and growing up. A multi-sectoral approach to changing the negative environment that fed the rise of the RUF would focus not only on reintegrating the youth who fought in the war, but also creating opportunities for the next generation of leaders. This may not seem like a radical idea at first glance, but implementing it does require a paradigm shift in the way funding is distributed. Donors concerned about securing the peace in Sierra Leone need to draw a link between educating and creating jobs for young people, and the political future of the country.

***Dennis Bright on Youth and Small Arms: An Interview***  
***15 October 2004, Freetown***

*Q: What is the situation with small arms in Sierra Leone after disarmament?*

A lot of the small arms are finding their way back into Liberia; I say back into Liberia because I'm sure some of them came from there and were used in our war. They are finding their way back into Liberia to be used in the disarmament process. During the propagation of the conflict, there was hardly any border in terms of small arms, because small arms flowed freely in and around this country, across the borders, in many different ways. So the problem is, you don't know what proportion of the residue of small arms would reach Liberia and feature in their disarmament programme, and what would actually be left here, if any. There is an initiative going on now known as Arms for Development; they are trying to collect these arms by linking them with development projects in communities. I understand they are doing very well getting some of these arms.

But then, the question is especially in the capital cities; like in every capital city. Like in Johannesburg, or anywhere, there are certain people who need arms to survive, and these are criminals. It is very difficult up until now to tell how much of that is left within our cities. Very difficult to tell. Because quite recently we have been hearing about armed robbery, in Freetown specifically. People are working on that, specifically the police and security forces. We are taking these things very seriously coming from war. Is it the residue of old arms, or new arms coming in? Only the police may be able to tell. But I think we have to be realistic. In every urban setting in Africa, every modern African city, even in these countries where you don't have war, you have a certain quantity of arms being used for criminal purposes. What we want to know is, have we come down to that level, or do we still have large caches of arms stowed away somewhere? I don't think so. I think the disarmament and post-disarmament efforts like AFD, as well as the DDR process in Liberia, would have considerably reduced the quantity of arms in Sierra Leone. At least, this is what I hope.

*Q: As someone who is working on youth issues, do you view proactive measures to empower the youth and employ them as directly related to the demand for guns?*

The youth during the war have been circulating and going around the country. They are now exposed to certain things in the urban settings

that they are not likely to have when they go back to rural settings. Basic among these is electricity, running water, health facilities, but especially recreation. That is, to go and hear music, and dance, and video, and that sort of thing. They are very much – the youth can be considered as modern African youth, many of them. And that is why they stay in the city where they can be as close as possible to modern trends that affect people in other big African cities. Now, I am certain that because they are all crowded here in the cities that they are living under desperate circumstances. And they will be very willing to move out of the city if a minimum of these comforts are assured.

I can challenge anybody that if my ministry is credited with the personnel that we need and with the funds that we need, we have enough initiatives to be able to turn the situation around and to get young people really engaged. We have the ideas. If you go to the research and capacity building unit that we have, we have been discussing these things. The problem is that a ministry cannot be seen to be implementing projects, because that died long ago when it was considered that ministries are not capable. So, NGOs might. But some of them lack ideas and they don't have the national spread that the ministry has. Today, if there is a programme for agriculture which is multi-sectoral, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to mobilise the young people, the Ministry of Agriculture, because of their technical expertise in the field, the Ministry of Local Government and Lands for the availability of land and articulation with the traditional authorities – if we have that kind of multi-sectoral approach with donors, there is already a project concept for us not to build state farms, but to create farming settlements for young people with basic inputs of shelter for them, and recreation for them. And a basic honorarium for them during the period of working, and the possibility for them to own the acres of land that they actually cultivate, for themselves.

You can integrate into that activity other activities related to agriculture, which might include transportation, road construction, building of shelter, because they have to be there, recreation, and sports. If you have a complex like that, you will have people rushing there, because that will give them hope. We have made that design, but it is not easy to sell such things because people have their own set thinking.

So, this problem of the youth is not insoluble. But the very first thing we have to do is to first of all sit down and accept that it is really a problem. And rather than wait until it explodes in our faces, we should

be more proactive rather than reactive. Everyone – all stakeholders. I'll give you an example. When we had the ex-combatants when war was there and we wanted to end the war, the young people who carried it out were considered as a specific group. And there was a specific programme called DDR which was worked out like a programme, and it was successful. I think you can extract from the youth today a good percentage of the most disadvantaged, and target them into a programme of that sort, with activities that are time bound with opportunities for evaluation just like we did for the DDR. I have tried to convince some people for that.

*Q: The problem with DDR is that job training focused on only one thing; how many mechanics can you have in one city? Is agriculture more sustainable?*

You are quite right. Agriculture and enterprise are what is sustainable. Those are the two major areas that we have to concentrate on. Agriculture is not just planting or crop cultivation alone. It is raising pigs and chickens. But then, you need people to buy and sell, and then you can integrate enterprise. If you have a buyers' co-operative, and you give them money they are able to buy in bulk, or they are able to have a small bank, to be purchasing at the harvest and selling to hotels or to the markets. Young people can have things to do.

This is even true in the urban setting; you can bring in business initiatives. Integrate some training into it. But all this now is really in a state of concepts. We don't have a major programme here, but we are working together with DFID and UNDP and a few others. What actually we are doing is pilot projects, small things, but with the success of those things we can learn lessons. In the course of next year, we will be able to come up with a massive programme for engagement of young people. This is the hope. But all this depends on whether all parties involved agree to consider the youth problem as THE problem.

*Q: Is there a sense within the government that the Ministry of Youth is closely linked to what the Ministry of Defence and the Police are trying to do?*

I really wonder whether my colleagues see that link. I really wonder. I really hope that they do, but I think if they did, they would be here by now.

*Q: Some people say that the war was about disenfranchised youth, trying to make a statement and trying to be heard (among other things, of course). Do you agree?*

You find that after the war, since everything was demolished, that all the factors now in the immediate aftermath of the war are very busy setting themselves up again, and they are not really looking at the interrelatedness of their activities. Agriculture will quickly want to set itself up, defence is doing its own thing. Education is doing its own thing. But they ignore the linkages.

*Q: Do you fear that with the UN mission on its way out, that if those bridges are not built or acknowledged, things could fall apart?*

For me, I am working very much on a major intervention on behalf of the youth problem. And that will have to be early next year...this would be deliberate, to wake up my colleagues and the international community as well. Because I think we cannot keep having the international community saying, "the youth is a problem," but then you pump money into another area. "Oh, the youth is a problem," but when you want to pump money into health, because according to your policies health education and agriculture are necessary, you just pop it there, without working on how best to solve the youth problem. So, it is up to them too, who have this money, who are bringing in all this money, to demand more from the people who are giving all this to health and education. I want to see how the youth problem is being addressed within that framework. It is for them to require that.

We believe that the money we are spending will be wasted if this problem is not addressed, because there will be a security problem. I think they have got to see that. But even among ourselves, as government, we need to be aware of the serious nature of what we are doing. When you are trapped in the political logic, it is not a very easy thing for a government to do, because it is seen as stepping out of line as it were. But I do believe that the president and I have a kind of respect, that I can afford that and do that. I want to make a major statement, and you may hear about it, but the international community needs to come up with a definite solution to the youth question and a commitment. That may give hope to hundreds of thousands of young people, if they see that someone is actually stepping out for them.

Then we can sit down and prioritise. Agriculture: now there is talk about food security, and agriculture, but it doesn't seem to be working

in the direction necessary of solving the youth problem. It is business as it used to be, agriculture as it used to be. We tried it with the FAO and the Ministry of Agriculture. But what we find out is that they have not absorbed the fact that this is a specific group initiative, which is youth. They carry on what they used to be doing, without working with us. We have many options. We can strengthen the youth component within each ministry, but then I think in addition we can create a bureau, a special bureau under this Ministry for a youth agricultural programme. And that bureau should be responsible for mobilisation, linking up with all these units that will have been created within the ministries, to meet regularly and work directly with the international donors so that they say, well, this is what we want to do. Ministry of Local Government and Lands, Ministry of Agriculture: we have identified 12,000 acres of viable land, and we want to develop it. So, you can tell the donors that we need five hundred units of housing for these people. They will go and build it themselves, and that is where they start earning money; the carpenters, the masons, these types. From the very beginning of those houses, you begin to give a chance. Before they actually start distributing the land among them, then you would have done something. But if we are not doing that, in that directly, identifiable way to the young people, then it is like no one is looking at them.

*Q: Culturally, are there obstacles to that kind of project? Is motivating them tied to the idea that they can be independent or exercise ownership over their own activities? The culture of the city is attractive, and going back to rural elites, the patrimonial system, is no longer viable for youth who have been fighters and independent. What do you think?*

There is this resistance, there is something like a generational tension between older and young people. The young people think that they are in such a condition today, and the older people must have been responsible somehow for their present predicament. And in their real lives, they have been witness to injustice perpetrated by some of the authorities; but there is a catch here. One has to be very careful in the analysis. You might be tempted to just move on to a conclusion, and thinking and wondering whether it is the traditional institution itself which is the problem, or the individuals as personalities who have eroded the traditions. I am saying this because I have the idea that these people may not be against the traditional institutions themselves: many of them are very proud to belong or to have connections. And many of them still do regard the good chiefs and still think that they are very useful and important.

You see, when these things work out very well there is a difference between the Western system of justice, when someone accuses you, you are found guilty, jailed, okay, you serve your sentence, and make sure that the person you had a problem with, nobody cares after. The system doesn't care whether you meet again. It is oblivious to the larger whole, the person who returns to the same community or society. It deepens the cut, the gorge between two individuals, two families, and institutionalises enmity because it has satisfied itself with a judgment and nothing beyond. That's the end of it; an acceptance is passed. There is a certain punishment and then justice is done. Traditional justice continues even after judgment has been passed, right or wrong has been given. These people still operate within the traditional system, under the traditional umbrella of the chieftaincy. And it can even go beyond trying to make amends and getting them to actually continue to live together again. After the judgment, to sit down again and make sure they talk.

*Q: Is there some process that needs to happen, is happening, or will happen with regard to reintegration now that disarmament is finished?*

This is the reason why people were calling for the role of the traditional authorities in the reintegration process. Because they confirm, they legitimise, they complete the reintegration process. They give it the final license, if you see the point I'm making. Because don't underestimate the ancestral traditional full powers and authority in the psyche of the individual. There is an area there which is definitely not quantifiable that one needs to consider. It would be a catastrophic analysis, if anything like that exists, to say, well the youth is angry, so traditional society is over or is no longer justifiable. Only to find out later, that the same people want to be chiefs themselves. Because there is something in it. The role of the chief is to keep the community and the clan together.

*Q: Many of the youth living in Freetown outside those traditional structures are living in poverty. How will this impact on the sustainability of peace in Sierra Leone in the next ten to twenty years?*

If they are here now, some of them are learning to live the ways of the world. If they don't want to go back to their homes, for most of them it's not because they don't want to go home – it's just because home does not provide some of the basic things they want. They wouldn't mind to go home if they have a good football field and if they can watch Manchester United and Arsenal. And you can do that. Only yesterday I

went to a town, and I gave the youths a satellite dish, and a television, and a generator. Getting their youth centre in place, because they want a youth entertainment centre, and those things are going to be the hub of activities. They will have snakes and ladders and other competitions later. I took the same things to Kailahun, I took the same things to other places. Because I believe that they are already connected. Whether we like it or not, we cannot disconnect them anymore. It is not possible, and it would be criminal to do so.

Now if a guy knows that if he goes, let's say, to his native Kamakwe, he is living here [Freetown], not having anything to eat, not having anything, if he knows that there is a scheme that he can benefit from, since he comes from Kamakwe, where he can go there and have two or three acres to himself, where he is supported along with other youths with machinery here and there to develop it, and he puts in some hours of work. And at the same time, when he is not working on the soil, he is learning something, a trade, as part of the package. And that over a period, whatever the harvests are, let's say for three years, any time there is a harvest, part of that money is kept for him in a bank. The other part is given to him for additional pocket money. The other part goes to the administration of this place. Then, after working, he can go to the youth centre, drink cold water, and then with his friends go watch the football, they can argue about it, then go to bed at night and wake up fresh in the morning. That guy is not staying here; he is rolling up there. It's so simple, I tell people; but they feel it's so complicated. They feel the youth problem is so complicated, it needs a big construct. They will bring a big expert tomorrow to come and build a construct for me. And this is not what they need. These people, they need something to attract them *now*.

How do they link up with traditional authorities? Many of the chiefs now, they are becoming more and more educated, you see. You will see a chief who is a degree holder, a graduate. It is no longer the old man, illiterate man, no. The whole thing is changing. You can see a very enlightened official. These are people who know better than to dominate young people. They know that it is no longer possible. But to preserve the authority of their order, they know that they have to negotiate a new relationship. We feel that the way civil society is operating now, civil society organisations, with the blessing of the state, can negotiate that new rapport between young people and chiefs. This is the reason we are supporting the strengthening of relations between civil society and the state.

There is a whole programme lodged at DFID [UK Department for International Development] now. It has not started yet but it is going to start soon. Civil society is coming to help, to negotiate a new kind of relationship between the subjects and the chiefs within the new democratic setting. I see the young people problem first of all, as an economic problem. That is the most immediate. In terms of their reinsertion into society, I think when they have the economic wherewithal, things will work out. But if they are hungry, then they are angry, they don't have a place to sleep, and they won't make it in the city. There are never going to be enough jobs in the city. I mean, even if you have a factory. They are opening factories, how many people are you going to employ? But they can produce food, vegetables, palm oil is being exported from this country. You can lead them into soap, you can develop industries. The potential is there, with youth focused initiatives.

*Q: What are the biggest challenges to implementing your ideas?*

The biggest challenge is for people to listen, both locally as well as internationally. The second one is for people to actually accept that the youth problem is an emergency and has to be treated as such, and not as a diluted cross-cutting issue that disappears into sectoral concerns. That is the second major challenge. The third challenge is to avoid heavy bureaucratic, over-conceptualisation of things. Rather be radical and common-sensical. Bring them a generator. Bring them a satellite dish. And put it there, and see if they are not going to troop down there. Somebody told me, [doubtfully] "well, it will begin to create needs." But these people already have needs, that's why they are here. I have been criticised, condemned by some people: "Why do you take the satellite dish to the village?" But they are already connected.

I worked in the NGO community before, because of my work with youth I was given this job at the political policy-making level. So when I explain to some of my colleagues, they don't understand some of these issues. If I decide to take things to remote areas near Kailahun, it's not because I'm crazy, but I make sure I take it there together with a generator, together with a deep freezer. These people have been used to drinking ice cold water here, and ice cream. During the course of the war, some of them on either side had to move to capital cities, to Kenema, to some of the big towns. Now some of them find their way back to where they were. And I asked my colleagues, just go there and do a small study on the nicknames. You know? Then you know how

connected they are. Some of them are Beckham, others are Ronaldo, others are Rambo, others are Tupac, others are Notorious B.I.G. in a VERY remote corner of a village. To me, this is an indicator that these people know more than you think. They are not desperately rural and backward young people anymore. For me, it is not a problem, it is an opportunity to make things move fast enough for them. Because they can catch it very quickly.

In government, I think it's an advantage to be bringing these ideas to keep people aware and to know that there is this kind of thinking in existence. If not, it would be coming across to them as some opposition thinking, or some radical civil society kind of thinking. But if within the house they hear this on a daily basis, maybe it's an advantage for the government and for policy making.

### MAP: Sierra Leone Mining Rights

