

CHAPTER 1

ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS

Conscription

Most African countries have more than 50% of their population below 25 years of age, and many of the world's poorest countries are in the sub-Saharan region. In combination, these factors suggest that youth in Africa have very limited livelihood prospects. Sierra Leone is no exception to this. Before the war less than 5% of the country's work force was involved in formal wage labour.¹⁷

The informal economy or 'second economy', employs the majority of urban youths in Africa's large towns and capital cities.¹⁸ In the rural areas semi-subsistence agriculture is the dominant way for youths to make a living. A third option open to young Sierra Leoneans is to work in the diamond mines in Eastern Sierra Leone.

The pre-war Sierra Leonean economy was to a large extent regulated by a system based on patrimonial principles:

*"Patrimonialism involves redistributing national resources as marks of personal favour to followers who respond with loyalty to the leader rather than to the institution the leader represents. Patrimonialism is a systematic scaling up, at the national level, of local ideas about patron-client linkages, shaped (in Sierra Leone) in the days of direct extraction of forest resources, about the duty of the rich and successful to protect, support and promote their followers and friends."*¹⁹

Under this system of patronage young people were on a constant lookout for patrons or 'big men', willing to help them in continuing their education. For the less promising or less lucky ones a patron could always provide some work or cash, in exchange for loyalty and labour.

With a growing economy the system of patronage could continue to function and young people could still wait for their turn and hope for a better future.

However, in the 1980s the national economy started to decline: prices of raw materials dropped dramatically, revenues from mining activities decreased and shadow state practices and corruption prevailed. Increasing numbers of youths found themselves without support, out of school and without a job (4).²⁰ With job opportunities already poor, the outbreak of the war made the picture even more grim. Schools were destroyed, trade and business activities declined because of the dangers of ambushes, and farms were plundered for food and cash-crops (1). Those best off, the local big men and paramount chiefs, for instance, left the villages for the relatively safe towns, leaving behind the ordinary villagers and young people who now had to look for new patrons. The war gave rise to new kinds of patrons, new 'big men': warlords and commanders (2). A new economic survival option was created; engaging oneself with a militia (3).

1. *Before the war I stayed with my mother. My mother was doing business and I helped her sometimes. There was no time to play games. I went to school but I stopped in form one. There was no money left to go to school because the business of my mother was destroyed because of the war. That was the time the war came to Kailahun. At that time the situation became more difficult for us. The RUF came and asked us to join them. Because I was not doing anything and there was no person looking after me I decided to join them and take up arms to fight. I joined the rebels purposely because of the difficulties we were having. We were suffering too much. The RUF was encouraging us to help them in their fight so that later we could enjoy a proper life.*
2. *When in 1991 the war started all education and farming activities seized. During 1991 and 1992 we were doing nothing. We were just close to the barracks. You could not escape the fighting. And that led me to be with them, gradually I was getting involved in that. I started being with them, doing work for them. By that time I was a small boy. I was around them getting water for them and such. That is how the interaction started. You know, at that time it was very difficult to stay with my people, because the life was very hard. So I came to the soldiers and presented myself and made friends with them.*
3. *[Before the war] it was nice for me because at that time my father was responsible for me, during my time at the primary school. I was living with my parents. But when I was just in secondary school this rebel war came to Sierra Leone and all the economic operations in the area stopped. Even the food we had to eat was not easy to get because we were under siege.*

There was not a vehicle moving, everywhere there were [road] blocks. Then my friends and I decided to take up arms to fight, just to survive.

4. *There is no job facility. You will see educated youths without jobs, just moving around. If at the end of the day that particular person hears about some rebels, he can join them, just to survive. That is why most of these guys decided to join the rebels, because they were not having jobs. Some were educated, but they decided to join the rebels instead of sitting down and waste their time. That is why most of the youths joined the rebels. That is the major reason. Because of lack of jobs.*

Participation

According to the British anthropologist David Keen, contemporary conflicts represent not only the collapse of systems, but also the creation of alternative systems, by which some may benefit, gain power and are protected.²¹

High ranking commanders, rebel leaders and government officials are among the key players in these conflicts and are often in a position to economically benefit from the breakdown in law and order. Looting, illegal diamond mining, logging and the plundering of cash-crop farms are some of the activities that fill the pockets of those in control.²² The US State Department estimated that between 1990 and 1994 Liberian President Charles Taylor was accruing annually an estimated USD\$75 million.²³ Huge economic benefits can be an important incentive to war-leaders to prolong conflicts rather than settle them. But to what extent is this true for the often young, ordinary rank and file fighters? Few insurgent groups pay their fighters, and even in defending forces the soldiers may be without official army numbers. According to Outram, “none of the Liberian factions (with the partial exception of the AFL) have paid or fed their fighters.”²⁴ As a matter of fact they are expected to live “from the land”, looting and plundering. But in many cases loot has to be handed over to the commanders (who in some cases re-distribute it) and few rank and file soldiers have the knowledge and contacts to make ‘big money’ out of the war.

Economic benefits for these rank and file soldiers are often minor and in most cases short-term (1). Few youth ex-combatants indicate that they expected to make huge profits out of the war and none indicates that lucre was a motivation to continue fighting. The economic gain is merely enough for sustenance, so to say. But holding a weapon gives the advantage over unarmed civilians who have food or other items (2). This is not to say that combatants *always* do

have sufficient food and supplies, and rank and files are always in a disadvantage position to their commanders. But few cases are known where combatants are worse off than the civilians in the same area.

The alternatives to combat life, to desert or escape and go to a refugee or displaced camp or to look for relatives in safer areas, are often not very attractive from a strictly economic point of view. Displaced camps operate on minimum standards. It is not so much the expectation of making huge economic gains that makes youth continue fighting but the unattractiveness of the non-fighting alternatives.

1. *My mother had other children to feed also, so I decided to leave together with some of my friends and go to the soldiers. By then, even when they went on patrol I went along with them. (...) Because you do everything for this soldier, like preparing the food, washing the clothes and fetching water, he will be responsible for you in the end and will give you some food from his ration.*
2. *I liked it in the army because we could do anything we liked to do. When some civilian had something I liked, I just took it without him doing anything to me.²⁵*

Re-conscription

There is a general understanding that the disarmament and demobilisation of combatants is only a first step towards a peaceful civilian life for these fighters. Peace-agreements and post-conflict scenarios usually include provisions for a DDR programme for ex-combatants. The type of conflict and its duration, the kind of peace-agreement (negotiated or military), the numbers of combatants and the numbers of factions, the amount of money and support available, are just a few factors which influence the specific design of a DDR programme.

A DDR programme has the purpose of 1) collecting the arms and ammunition of combatants, 2) breaking the command structures and 3) supporting and promoting the peaceful rehabilitation of the demobilised ex-fighters into civilian society.

The *reintegration* component often involves school fees for those willing to go back to school, apprenticeships or training at vocational institutes, affiliation

with ‘food for work projects’ and so forth. The rationale behind reintegration support is twofold: to make it more attractive for combatants to give up their weapons by offering them alternatives to their violent livelihoods and to prevent reintegrating ex-combatants from depending excessively on their families and communities, who themselves have suffered considerably during war.

Although there is extensive knowledge and experience that ought to contribute to good practices for DDR programmes, they remain dogged by shortcomings and failures. Most reintegration programmes for under-age ex-combatants include the possibility of providing school fees for those ex-combatant who want to go back to school. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the section about education, this usually involves a limited period of support after which these youths have to look for funds themselves. This leads to much frustration (2).

Other frustrations derive from ‘food-for-work’ programmes or skills training. Food-for-work programmes are aimed at enabling the ex-combatants to overcome the first difficult period after demobilisation, but they leave them with little once the programme ends. More constructive seem to be skills training programmes at vocational training institutes. It may not, however, make sense to train a team of car-mechanics and send them to their villages of birth where there might be only one or two cars around, so local markets need to be considered when deciding on the appropriateness of training.²⁶ Moreover, besides the actual skills training, the trainees need other skills to prepare them to start a business, such as business economics, reading, writing and arithmetic. They also need tools and access to loans (1).

The agricultural sector is one of the few sectors, if not the only one, capable of absorbing large numbers of poorly-educated youths. It would be wrong to assume that ex-combatants are not interested in agriculture at all. Often it is a lack of knowledge and awareness of the advantages of agriculture that prevents them from considering this option.²⁷ Evidence from post-war discussions with young people in Sierra Leone²⁸ suggests that it is not so much the arduous labour that is resented as the vulnerability of young people to manipulation by traditional rural elites. Another aspect is the high and unrealistic expectations of these youths about urban employment and the often-correct perceptions of the un-attractiveness of rural life for young people.

It is important to realise that many of these ex-combatants gave up their guns because they heard that another way of making a living was being offered to them. If this peaceful alternative is not forthcoming, they feel betrayed and,

as the following accounts make clear, may indeed start to think about going back to their former comrades who have not yet disarmed (3).

1. *Until they called for peace I fought. After that peace call I went to disarm and gave my weapon to UNAMSIL. They brought me to this institution to learn a trade. By now we have completed the course of six months. We are expecting the NCDDR to help us by providing some tools so that we can make our own survival. They promised us all kinds of things if we were willing to lay down our weapons. They said that we had to think about our future, stop fighting and that they could help us. However, now I see that they are only helping us a little bit. This difficult situation forces some of my brothers and sisters to go back to the bush [that is to re-conscript] because of lack of real support. If you do not have work you have to go back to the bush.*
2. Q: Would you go back to the soldiers if the situation goes bad again for you?

A: You mean going back to join them. Well, why not, because presently I am not well cared for. Although she [the interviewee's care-giver] is trying it is difficult to pay my school fees, because it is becoming too expensive. And because there is nothing else for me to do here. My mother is not here, my brothers are not here. My father is dead. So who can take care for me?

3. Q: Are there many ex-combatants who stayed in the DDR programme who have returned to the bush?

A: The majority of these young men have returned to the bush. (...)The reason is that there is nobody taking up responsibility for them. They went and joined the rebels.

(...) They went to take up arms to fight saying that unless the government will pay all their benefits they will not come out of the bush. (...) If the condition is not favourable I will go back to the bush.