

CHAPTER 2

EDUCATIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Conscription

Education is the key to success, according to most Sierra Leonean youths. Notwithstanding the high numbers of unemployed educated people, without education you have even a smaller chance for a good job, they argue:

"I want to manage my own future, I want to have control over my own household. If you are not educated, you will find it very difficult to live. If even those who are educated find it difficult, what about you who is not educated. They suffer more than the educated ones. (...) That education is my own legacy. A plantation can die down in a day, but if you are educated, wherever you go the education stays with you. My plantation will not follow me. That is why most of us really try to be educated, because we do not know if there will be any improvement in the future."

In pre-war Sierra Leone, education, and in particular higher education, was considered more a privilege²⁹ than an entitlement. Just before the war there were about 2000 primary schools around the country.³⁰ Access to the university and overseas scholarships were, to a large extent, controlled by the government.

Most children in Sierra Leone had at least benefited from a few years of primary education. But after primary school it became more complicated. School fees (or examine fees) for secondary school were higher and these schools are located in the major villages or towns. To overcome these two setbacks there were different strategies possible. Children can leave their village and stay with relatives in town and thus be able to attend school:

"Well really, I love being in town, because...[hesitates]...but I love my village. But in terms of education I love the town. There you have some elders who discuss matters with you. They enlighten you on topics, on subjects. But in the village there is nobody. There are no intellectual people."³¹

Some of the older youth can look for patrons to sponsor their education in exchange for future loyalty and support. Yet others, without sponsorship, are attending school at intervals. They try to earn some money by seasonal labour, whether as handymen, farmers or diamond miners, then return to school and follow another term when they have saved enough money. With so many uncertainties, it is not difficult to imagine that many youths drop out of school. Lack of sponsors is cited as the main cause for this.

When the war began, the two most important preconditions for attending school were under threat: schools were destroyed (1) and incomes dropped. Only some of the major towns and villages not (yet) affected by the war still had functioning schools (3). But many villages and towns saw their schools closed down or ransacked and destroyed (2). As far as the financial side was concerned, farms and cash-crops were destroyed, looted or had to be left behind leaving the farmers with no income and thus unable to send their children to school. People with money, the patrons, fled to safer areas, leaving youths without sponsors. Because business slowed down, fewer youths were able to earn extra money. Going to the diamond areas became a common but more dangerous journey.

1. *Well, it is obvious. Before the war we were attending school, right. But as soon as the war entered Sierra Leone everything went berserk, everything was destroyed. By then there was nothing to do for us, we were just wandering around, without going anywhere. So we decided to join the army because we were doing nothing, except going up and down the area. The school was closed, everything was closed. We were in the barracks and we knew all these things, the movements of the soldiers. Our parents were already there. There was no education, that made us to join.*
2. *But then the war approached. But I said when this situation is normal I will go back to school. The reason why I took part in the war was because there was no education in our headquarters.*³²
3. Q: Do you think that if the school continued to be open and running throughout the war, you would have not joined the soldiers?

A: Yes, yes. I would not have joined because I would have been supported. (...) Presently, the best way [to prevent children joining the soldiers] would be by making the educational facilities available to them. So you keep them busy. You have to ask them about their problems and although you will not be able to help them with everything, they will appreciate it when you do at least something.

4. Q: So what was the major reason to join?

A: *There was no education, that made us to join.*

Participation

Whenever normal educational opportunities are blocked, with schools, apprenticeships and vocational training institutes closed down, these young people, eager to learn something, start to look out for other educational opportunities. Joining a militia, as we have seen, will give some basic economic security. But being a combatant is something that must be learned, just like any other skill. Youths were trained in war-tactics and taught about the different weapons (2), similar to, for instance, a tailor's apprentice would be trained in sewing and taught about different materials and designs. The period of training could range from a few weeks up to several months (1). But as with most professions, the skill was mostly learned by practicing it.

Less aware of or worried about the risks, to many children and youth fighting is just another skill to be learned. In a country where, even during peacetime, youths have to reach material self-reliance at a young age, they are constantly looking out for training possibilities. Linking up with a militia might not be, after all, the most irrational choice to make, if one wishes to learn something and there are no other training opportunities left.

Not all youth combatants were entirely deprived of all forms of normal education. Fighters belonging to the CDF often went on patrols for a limited period, having time in between to continue farming or learning. Several ex-RUF youth fighters told about the free "bush-schools" in the main camps of the RUF (3).

On the whole, looking back, most ex-combatants label their years with factions as a 'waste of time', referring to the advanced educational level they might have had if they did not join (they seem to forget that even if they did not join, it would have been difficult to continue their education, which was for many a reason for joining in the first place). It is unlikely however, that in all those years while they were combatants, they did not learn anything that could be of use in a post-war situation. They have detailed knowledge about certain areas of the country. Some have achieved a real interest in technical matters (2). They have learned to use their wits to survive, they have an extensive network of contacts and people and they can be organised to establish

cooperative working groups, based on their war-time organisational mode. Last but not least, their 'eyes are open' and nobody will easily manipulate or fool them again.

It is a great challenge for the government, the NGOs and the people themselves to look for positive and constructive ways in which the skills and capacities of these young people can be used to rebuild Sierra Leonean society.

1. *Yes, they trained us. They [gave] us commando training. Well, the commando training really [amounts to] this: when they give you one bullet you must kill one man, one bullet for one man. When they give you seven bullets you should kill seven rebels. [If] you don't do that they will fire [shoot] you. So we trained that training. Do the body advancing, do this crawling. Shoot for [the] target. The target shows if you are a good soldier, because they set the target and you sight the target. So that in the bush you are not firing [in a] scattered way, like...dadadadada.³³*
2. *[The] AK-47 is an old weapon. The AK-58 is a recent weapon. (...) When you drop the weapon and leave it like that, when the weapon falls on the ground, it fires. Yes, it causes damage. But the AK-47, you can drop it, jump on it, and nothing will happen. Like this other one, AK-44, that's a two pistol grip. You also can drop it, let it fall, and it won't fire. The AK-58 is dangerous, whereas the AK-44 and 47 have a padlock here, so when you pull it, it will lock. It cannot easily pass, the bullet. On the AK-58, it is only small, the padlock...little and short...it is small. When you get down, the firing pin releases easily, and touches the bullet. Because the bullet is almost in the right place, and just [requires] the fire-pin to touch it. And then the bullet goes. That's the difference between AK-47, AK-44 and AK-58.³⁴*
3. Q: Were there also schools in these camps?

A: I have been to five different camps. One of them had a school. The rebels were convincing civilian teachers to teach in the camp. All the school materials were free.

Re-conscription

Sierra Leonean youths are on a constant lookout for educational and training opportunities. Whenever normal peacetime opportunities become limited, youths can choose to join an armed faction and thereby at least learn the skills

of warfare. To most young fighters the main incentive to lay down their weapons was the opportunity offered to learn a skill or to go back to school. As mentioned earlier, the reintegration component of the Sierra Leonean DDR programme was centred on starting up formal education for ex-child combatants and providing vocational training for youths and adults. But these demobilised fighters are very clear about what they will do, and what some of their colleagues have already done, if these promises are not delivered upon. (1, 2, 3&4)

How realistic is it to offer all youth ex-combatants the possibility to continue their formal education? Agencies helping these youths must be cautious not to put them on a dead-end track. For instance, a youth combatant who had joined at the age of 13 might have had only a few years of primary school. If this young person is returning to school after demobilisation, let us say at the age of 19 or 20, he is approaching his thirties before he finishes his secondary education, after which he needs to learn a profession. Throughout it all he needs sponsorship. Agencies working on the reintegration of these child and youth combatants are often reluctant, for understandable reasons, to involve themselves in such long term engagements.

It would perhaps be better practice to teach demobilised youths skills that enable them to generate their own income. If they learn a skill (plus some basic reading, writing and arithmetic) by which they are able to make some money, they can still choose to go back to school at some later stage on a part-time basis. Some youths (including ex-combatants), tapping rubber on the plantations in Liberia start work at six in the morning and finish at two in the afternoon. Afterwards, they attend afternoon classes, so eager to learn that they study till dusk.

Because education and vocational training is so high on the agenda of young people, it is both a way to catalyse their demobilisation and reintegration process and in the case of unfulfilled promises or difficulties, a major cause for their return to militias (1, 2, 3 & 4)

1. *The time I went for disarmament I gave my gun to the commander. I was scared to come but it was only because of the education that I was willing to come. But it was not completely as they promised, so I can still feel bad about it. We are struggling a lot. When you are going to school, you go with an empty stomach, there is no food. There is no material to learn, so how can you learn? If problems will happen again, you must join them, the soldiers, again, because you are struggling here. We are just managing*

it. You know, we feel embarrassed. If the soldiers will come back here we would join them. It was in the beginning of 1999 that the soldiers revolted but unfortunately they did not reach this part. They were just stopped before they could reach Kenema.

2. Q: Are you saying that if you drop out of school, you might go back to the soldiers?

A: Yes, I will go back to them.

3. *Let me tell you the fact, we are suffering. Obviously, we are suffering. And if that continues, if this particular situation continues... Really, I am not telling you lies, but the storm is not yet over. Because as a young boy, at this age, if you are attending school, without any support, it is very bad. We are just attending because of our determination. We want to have a good future. But there is no support, so how can you be determined when there is no support. Because as a student you are attending school and you need certain materials, which will help you to continue your education. For instance, textbooks, we need them but we do not have them. Other material we used to have but we do not have them. Every day the teachers urge us for that, but we just cannot afford it. We are just managing. Sometimes we are sent away from school because we do not have these materials and the fees. That is the problem.*

4. Q: Do you know about boys who have disarmed before but then decided to go back to the rebels or the army?

A: There are plenty of them. A lot of them are in Liberia and they have not yet come back. And there are a lot of them in Daru. And some are attending school in Liberia.