

Tackling

Sierra Leone's youth crisis

More than a year has passed since President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah declared an official end to war and the fighting factions disarmed and demobilised. Yet one of the greatest challenges facing Sierra Leone today remains the reintegration and settlement of its youth.

Jeannette Akua Eno* describes a programme which attempts to engage constructively with young people in Sierra Leone as it emerges from civil war, offering them positive opportunities and support.

Young people played a central role in Sierra Leone's brutal conflict as both fighters and civilian casualties. Marginalised youth and the relative ease with which the various armed factions recruited them fed on a longstanding crisis of blocked education and employment opportunities for young people. Child soldiers were recruited by all groups: the Sierra Leone Army (SLA), the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the Kamajors /Civil Defence Forces (CDF). Boys and girls were reportedly the main victims of RUF abductions, rape, torture, killings, forced labour and combat training. In RUF camps, the drugging of youths to desensitise them was common.

War brought an end to formal education for most young girls and boys in Sierra Leone. Since the early 1990s, many Sierra Leonean youths from poorer rural households have grown up knowing only war and without ever going to school. Deprived of education and training opportunities, health care and income-generating activities, their lives have thus far been ones of poverty, dependency, dislocation and family separation. This has had a dire effect on the entire country.

A huge task lies ahead for Sierra Leoneans to transform their severe youth crisis into an opportunity for post-conflict growth and stability. It must be remembered that war exacerbated, rather than created, Sierra Leone's youth crisis. One of the greatest causes identified is the country's persistent political, social and economic decline, brought on by decades of ill-conceived fiscal policies, mismanagement, corruption and political instability. The magnitude of this youth crisis, if ignored, is likely to impede efforts for a lasting peace and increase the country's social, political and economic instability. The outbreak of armed conflict in neighbouring Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire poses further dangers, as

disaffected young people and ex-combatants will be much more likely to migrate and enlist as mercenary fighters there. Engaging with young people constructively and offering them positive opportunities is therefore crucial.

In an effort to prevent young men and women being lured into such dangerous occupations as mercenaries or diamond digging, Conciliation Resources (CR) has initiated community level youth-focused programmes in the diamond district of Kenema in eastern Sierra Leone and the town of Bo in the south. The "Youth in Progress" programme grew out of a series of discussions with young people that aimed to identify their immediate and medium term needs, develop micro-projects and raise awareness on key issues of peacebuilding, conflict analysis, rights-based issues and civic education.

Since September 2000, CR-Sierra Leone has focused on providing recreational facilities for existing youth clubs in the shape of drop-in centres for 14-25 year olds. These are places where young people can "hang out", play indoor and outdoor sports and take time to discuss and think about what they want to do with their lives. Regular football, netball and volleyball tournaments for men and women are supported, along with various cultural and theatre activities. Small libraries at the centres are also well stocked with donated books and computers. Over 2,000 youths have attended Kenema's drop-in centre, and more than 1,000 in Bo, which opened later in 2002. Both centres are co-managed by a democratically elected Youth Coordinating Committee, made up of equal numbers of males and females. In Kenema, youths from the drop-in centre collaborated with United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and UNAMSIL to rehabilitate the town playing field and build new changing rooms.

The project has seen an increase in the self-confidence and self-esteem of the young men and women involved. It has won support not just from local youths but also from community leaders, parents, government officials and educational institutions. In December 2002, the Kenema drop-in-centre coordinated a Youth Festival, which attracted thousands of people from the surrounding region for almost five days of music, dance, theatre, sports and public debates. The whole event passed without any violence – a remarkable achievement proving that young people can behave in a responsible way, given the opportunity.

Transforming young girls' lives

The damage that young people have suffered physically, psychologically, socially, politically and economically, if left unchanged, will render them incapable of effectively fulfilling their economic and reproductive roles in society. The long-term effects of the widespread sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls should not be underestimated and will require long-term and non-harmful strategies to transform young girls' lives. In order to develop appropriate responses to the needs of young women attending the drop-in centre in Kenema, CR-Sierra Leone carried out a gender needs assessment last year. It found that females on average had between one to seven years of formal schooling, whilst males had ten to twelve years. One girl succinctly summed up the cultural beliefs that underpin the continuing marginalisation of women in Sierra Leonean society: "My

Jeannette Eno (centre) with young women from the 'Medical Starlets' volleyball team at the Kenema Drop-in Centre in eastern Sierra Leone.



Conciliation Resources/Jeannette Eno

father said that educated or not, the woman ends up in the kitchen. It is therefore a waste to send girls to school”.

The gender needs assessment also found that many youths have no marketable form of skill training and that young women wanted skills training and income-generation support. Training programmes were subsequently designed to emphasise gender equality within the youth groups, staff and volunteers at the centres. These included training sessions for a group of twenty young mothers who set up and now run a very successful canteen in the Kenema centre. Their training took into account the extra pressures on them as mothers, by holding sessions at convenient hours and providing childcare allowances.

Other training activities with young people in the drop-in-centres have continued to focus on conflict handling and life skills, along with some HIV/AIDS prevention sessions in collaboration with the non-governmental organisation International Rescue Committee (IRC). Over 60 per cent of the youths that CR-SL works with are in the high-risk age group of 15-25 years for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. While HIV/AIDS infection rates in Sierra Leone are relatively low for Africa – around three per cent – there is real concern that rates have risen because of the high level of rape and sexual abuse used as a war strategy by some combatants, and also because many peacekeeping soldiers were from heavily infected countries. Health education, with a special focus on HIV/AIDS, therefore

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Young band players preparing for the procession to launch the Youth in Progress Drop-in Centre in Bo, southern Sierra Leone. (November 2002)

poses a significant challenge in the country's post-war reconstruction.

The future of the country will be lost if we continue to ignore the glaring needs of young men and women and their potential. CR welcomes recent moves by the government of Sierra Leone through its Ministry for Youth and Sport, which has begun to formulate inclusive, cohesive and constructive strategies around youth engagement, and has initiated dialogue around a National Youth Policy. Nevertheless, the efforts of government, NGOs, the business community and young people must be harnessed to transform the old order into opportunities for a just and lasting peace. ■

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EU-Sierra Leone Rehabilitation and Resettlement Programme

The primary objective of this project was to help create income, employment and training opportunities for ex-combatants and unemployed youths, to improve the availability of basic social services (education, health, water and sanitation), to increase the amount of household disposable income and, finally, to rebuild community infrastructure (road network, markets, etc). The first phase of the programme started in March 1997 but implementation was disrupted between May 1997 and July 1998 by a coup, followed in 1999 and 2000 by the evacuation of the technical assistance team for security reasons.

Phase 1 implemented projects in the agricultural sector and in related income generation. To address the needs of war-affected farmers, seeds were distributed, agricultural tools provided, 25,032 acres of tree crop plantations were rehabilitated and assistance was provided to cultivate vegetables; agricultural stores, drying floors and crop processing equipment were supplied; fishing boats, canoes, fish-washing platforms and nets were provided; animal pens were built, and poultry, goats, sheep and pigs were distributed.

In the educational sector, the project addressed skills training, building of schools and renovation of vocational training centres, and supply of school furniture.

In the health sector a number of hospitals were rehabilitated, peripheral health care units were built or renovated; and medical staff received refresher training.

Projects for ex-combatants provided paid labour: amongst other activities they cleared 20 miles of waterways, 7,000 attended civic education and peace-building workshops, while 748 received skills training.

From the success and the lessons learned during phase 1, the second phase emerged, covering July 2002 to June 2005. The overall objective is to contribute further to increased security, social stability and economic revival by helping the population and communities affected by the conflict, as well as former combatants, to return to normal, productive lives. These objectives will be accomplished through assistance to war-affected populations and communities to resettle in their areas of origin through agricultural assistance programmes, support for reintegrating ex-combatants into society through paid employment concentrating on rehabilitation of infrastructure and improving the provision of basic social services in the health, sanitation and education fields.

The shift from the focus on ex-combatants to a focus on war-affected communities and the integration of ex-combatants is in recognition that no single group should be given preferential treatment in the process of rebuilding social stability and economic revival.

The programme now covers the entire country, projects are primarily designed to benefit whole communities or groups. The flow of requests for assistance is constant. The programme is providing much-needed support in re-launching Sierra Leone's economy and re-establishing basic social services, and a return to normality in Sierra Leone.