

Political youth: Finding alternatives to violence in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

Politicising violence and coercing youth into politics are historic and entrenched strategies used by political elites in Sierra Leone to pursue and attain their own ambitions in power struggles at national level. In a continuation of these deep-rooted practices, the post-war era has witnessed democratic elections marred by the intimidating tactics of some of the country's youth; tactics managed behind the scenes by others. Ten years on from the end of hostilities, the majority of the country's youth remain deeply impoverished with few economic opportunities or hopes for change, amidst a political culture that sidelines their interests. Despite new policies introduced by the government, legal and programmatic measures have been ineffective in addressing the causes and consequences of the marginalisation and illiteracy, poverty and unemployment that remain dominant characteristics of youth in Sierra Leone. In 2012, a decade after the war officially ended, Sierra Leone holds its third round of post-conflict presidential and legislative elections. It is anticipated that the polls will be characterised by so-called 'youth violence', spiralling out of control in a mêlée of interparty hostility and brutality following the recruitment of youth as personal bodyguards or security squads for politicians and competing political parties. Continued socio-economic disenfranchisement is believed to be a distinguishing factor in this worrying malaise (Zack-Williams, 2008; Utas, 2010). This sort of manipulation is in stark contrast to post-war promises made by the country's authorities to its youth population. In recognition of their systematic marginalisation in the years that led up to war, the government promised to "promote a culture of excellence" that would empower youth "to be productive members of society" (GoSL, 2002).

Throughout 2009, and again in mid-2010, there were serious clashes among youth supporting all three main political parties. By 2011, youth violence at campaign rallies resulted in one civilian death, scores injured, a physical attack on the leader of the opposition and the burning of ruling party property. Following this mêlée, the police placed a temporary ban on all political rallies, processions or public meetings. Meanwhile, the ruling party co-opted some ‘youth leaders’ and recruited a number of ex-militia – some implicated in serious attacks on political opponents – to join the Operational Support Division (OSD) of the police. Fears rose that if this practice continued, the opposition might similarly recruit from among thousands of resettled former fighters (youth), posing a grave threat to the country’s medium- and long-term security (Amnesty International, 2011). In January 2012, the Sierra Leone government purchased assault weapons worth millions of dollars to equip the OSD. Subsequent alarm among the international community prompted a statement by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), requesting that the government authorities respond “proportionately” to security threats and ensure “security forces remained committed to upholding applicable international law” (UNSC, 2012). These events suggest that, rather than “promoting a culture of excellence”, a culture of violence is being encouraged among the country’s youth.

This scenario is somewhat puzzling, given the post-war commitments made to youth by the national government and international partners. Both local and global actors made an elaborate point of focusing a magnitude of resources on post-war youth programming, influenced by the dominant discourse on a ‘youth crisis’ in contemporary peacebuilding missions (Chaudhary, 2011; Bøås & Dunn, 2007). Some of the top priorities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission¹ (of which Sierra Leone was one of the first beneficiaries) were to address youth unemployment, introduce a national youth policy and establish a national youth commission through an act of parliament. Civil society determined to empower and embolden the country’s youth through myriad initiatives and

1 The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission is an extension to the UN peacemaking and peacekeeping architecture, which supports longer-term peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict. Its initial commitment to Sierra Leone in 2007 amounted to US\$35 million, with an additional US\$7 million pledged in 2010.

programmes. Promises were made to create jobs; widen participation; provide education, skills and training; and address youth marginalisation, which was at the heart of the outbreak of war (Richards, 1996; TRC, 2004; Peters, 2011). Yet onlookers still perceive this group as a potential threat to continued peace and stability, because many of the pre-conflict conditions that helped fuel youth participation in the war still exist, and the lasting psychological, social and economic impacts the war had upon them still prevail.

To provide some answers to the difficult questions these realities raise, this chapter examines post-war programming for youth engagement and development in Sierra Leone in the context of broader institutional reform, and analyses its propriety and efficacy to address the central concerns of youth as the country emerged from the trauma of war. The current orthodoxy – that the youth of Sierra Leone pose a threat to lasting peace – is contested, and the argument made that youth are, in fact, the country's best hope for sustainable development, for economic stability and for political change. It is further argued that the manipulation of youth by elite actors of all persuasions, the fragility and economic plight of the state, the lack of coherent commitment by international partners, and the pervasiveness of cultural practices, are greater threats to the country's longer-term peace and stability.

The first section provides some local definitions of youth, along with an account of their experiences prior to the war and their role when the fighting started. The second section provides more detail about the immediate post-conflict environment and the many challenges facing the youth as they were absorbed back into society. In the third section, the various post-war responses to the 'youth challenge', and the different actors involved in the process, are examined in greater detail. The final section presents an analysis of the impact of these activities in broader terms, and their relevance and efficacy in addressing the perennial concerns of the youth. The conclusion draws together the central themes and offers some constructive recommendations for policy change – suggestions that might engender better prospects for the country's youth and address the main challenges facing the nation as it moves tentatively into its second decade of peace.

Youth and conflict in Sierra Leone

The expression ‘youth’ in Sierra Leone is associated with the age group 15–35 years.² Considering life expectancy in the country is approximately 48 years,³ this group includes the majority of the adult population – a quarter of the total population. A more accurate and useful distinction, therefore, is to describe those citizens with no access or entitlement to jobs, land, property or wives; those with little or no social protection; the marginalised and powerless (Christensen and Utas, 2008:517). The definition is more helpful when it is less to do with numbers and more to do with socio-economic status and political exclusion. Youth in Sierra Leone denotes the unmarried, the unemployed and the voiceless (Ismail et al., 2009), and is almost exclusively associated with males in common parlance.⁴ It should be noted, however, that youth are not a homogenous group. As well as a huge disparity in age, they also represent different regions and ethnic groupings, live in rural or urban areas, have different family responsibilities, and disparate levels of education.

Experiences of youth prior to the war

Since the early days of independence (1961), the youth of Sierra Leone experienced systematic marginalisation, disenfranchisement and exploitation by both their government and traditional authority (Spitzer and LaRay, 1973; Richards, 1996). As the promises of democracy withered away, a system of patrimony became the *modus operandi*. Jobs and other privileges were shared out only to supporters of the governing regime. By the late 1970s, the authoritarian government had transformed the country to a one-party state⁵ – a system vehemently opposed

2 Sierra Leone National Youth Policy (2003). Available from: <http://www.youth-policy.com/policies/SLENational_Youth_Policy.pdf> [Accessed 15 August 2011].

3 United Nations Human Development Indices (2010). Available from: <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/default.html>> [Accessed 26 July 2011].

4 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko, Youth Partnership for Peace and Development, 4 August 2011.

5 President Siaka Stevens’ All Peoples’ Congress formed the one-party state which governed from 1967 until the military coup of 1992. A referendum to change to a one-party state took place in 1978, and there was a change of leadership to Joseph Momoh in 1985.

by the country's youth population. Their resistance bore the brunt of violent government backlash (TRC, 2004) and, in protest, they became more political, revolutionary and unruly when exclusion in all its forms – economic, political, social and cultural – combined to breed grievance and resentment (Richards, 1996). Elites capitalised on the rebelliousness of young people and recruited many to their party 'youth wings' to help in political campaigning (Abdullah, 1998; Rosen, 2005:77). This involved the intimidation of opposition parties and civilians, using force and violence if necessary (Spitzer and LaRay, 1973; Forna, 2002, Gberie, 2005). In this way, politicians successfully transformed radical young reformists into violent political thugs, a practice that continues today (Utas, 2010).

Relations between the youth and traditional authority – chiefs and elders in local communities – were similarly problematic, and constructed on a deep asymmetry of power. Village chiefs and landless farm labourers, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces (Mokuwa et al., 2011), were embroiled in a deeply distorted structural arrangement where young men from poor families could not acquire farmland unless they were married. Polygamy – widely practised among rural elites who could afford the bride price (some men had as many as 10 wives) – meant that a lack of access to women was a cause of deep resentment (Keen, 2005; Mokuwa et al., 2011). 'Woman damage' – sexual relations with another man's wife – involved the payment of cash, property or labour to polygamous elites by men already living in dire poverty (Crosby, 1937; Lewis, 1954; Bledsoe, 1980). An underclass of men thereby became tied and indebted to powerful rural elites in a similar way to urban youth whose loyalty had been bought by politicians.

In the run-up to war, oppressive power structures such as those detailed above; lack of economic opportunities within rural chiefdoms; the disenfranchisement of students with no jobs to progress to; and the deprivation of a lumpen, illiterate, urban youth led to a cauldron of disquiet across the hinterland, and later in the city (Abdullah, 1998; Fanthorpe, 2005; Jackson, 2005). As the new nation began its gradual atrophy, opportunities for its young population became more and more remote, but their protestations were met with gross abuse of human rights (Peters, 2011). During the 1970s and 1980s, economic mismanagement

and shocks on the global markets pushed the country's economy into a spiral of decline, and the deterioration of the education sector created a growing number of young people unable to find work or leave home (Banya, 1993; Richards, 1996). The systematic political marginalisation of this group and their socio-economic discrimination influenced the ideological rhetoric at the vanguard of the conflict and factional recruitment campaigns during the war (King, 2007). Under the 2001–2 disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme, youth constituted the majority of the 72 000 demobilised combatants, in addition to over 6 000 ex-fighters below the age of 18 (Ismail et al., 2009:34).

Summary of the war and the role of youth

The conflict in Serra Leone lasted from March 1991 to January 2002. Over the course of those 11 years – amidst coups, failed peace accords, intermittent ceasefires and democratic elections – there were around 50 000 fatalities, mass amputation and mutilation of civilians, displacement of the majority of the population and incalculable numbers of physically and psychologically traumatised citizens and combatants (Reno, 2006). Much of the country's physical infrastructure was destroyed including government buildings, schools, courts, clinics and hospitals, water and electricity supplies, roads, ports, bridges, development at the country's hydroelectric plant, whole villages and many small communities. Around 30% of educated nationals left the country (UNCTAD, 2009:74). In 1997, the economy was experiencing negative growth of minus 15% (ILO, 2010; Keen, 2005; Abdullah, 1998). By the end of the war in 2002, the country's formal economy had shrunk by 40% and all financial institutions had collapsed.

The extreme violence against civilians and the high number of children and youth among the armed factions gave the conflict its distinct character – as did the shifting alliances between the various militias, the centrality of foreign protagonists and the dominance of diamonds in funding the war. The youth who had voluntarily taken up arms – and it should be remembered that the

majority of the country's youth had not⁶ – responded to the ideological rhetoric of educated elites in an uprising, which was to gradually change from revolution borne of genuine grievance to protracted and violent conflict fuelled by greed.⁷ Youth fighters were not confined to the rebel forces; they also made up the majority of government troops, and forced recruits across all factions. So similar were their grievances and goals that rebels and troops eventually formed an alliance – coming together to stage a successful coup in 1997 – the product of a rebellious youth culture searching for a radical alternative to decades of corrupt rule, exploitation and marginalisation (Bangura, 1997; Peters, 2011). Girls and young women were specifically targeted during the war; some were willing recruits, but others were forced to join the rebels as 'bush wives', sex slaves, cooks, porters, scouts and fighters (Denov, 2010). The majority of the country's youth who did not take up arms found themselves forced to flee from their villages – many across the border into Guinea or Liberia, or internally displaced to urban areas. Work was hard to find and their education was disrupted or non-existent for years.

Post-war promises to youth

The Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999 held little hope that things might change for the youth. Excluded from the negotiations, the young combatants who had fought with all armed factions,⁸ including government troops, entrusted their interests to the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Foday Sankoh, who was interested only in furthering his own ambitions (Keen, 2005). No representative of the renegade soldiers was present at Lomé and no specific provision was made

6 The United Nations disarmed just over 70 000 former combatants after the war – around 10% of those being children under the age of 18 (UNDDR). The estimated youth population of the country – according to the national definition – is over 1 500 000.

7 See the thesis on *Greed versus grievance* (Berdal and Malone, 2000).

8 There were several different factions that took part in the violence, as well as the two main protagonists – the RUF and the Sierra Leone Armed Forces (SLAF). These factions included the Kamajor militia, an indigenous army of local warriors; the CDF, a paramilitary organisation that supported the civilian government; and fighters from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council – a union of RUF soldiers, remnants of the National Provisional Ruling Council military junta, and disgruntled factions of the SLAF.

for the youth of the country (Gberie, 2005:157). In the absence of any tangible promises made to the youth at Lomé, the recommendations of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were crucial. This was because the continuation of corruption, discrimination and marginalisation could reinforce historic power struggles among the elite and the youth/peasantry, which had previously "suffocated the growth of democracy and good governance" and "nurtured a rebellious attitude" (TRC, 2004: Volume 3(A), paragraph 212). Unemployment among the youth was a significant factor in the conflict; the war economy was more lucrative than that of peace and the AK-47 offered higher status and engendered greater respect than the hopeless life of the streets (Cramer, 2006).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), locally referred to as the 'Agenda for Change', contained plenty of promises to support the peaceful development of the nation's youth and to create an environment that encouraged and enabled their full participation in social and economic measures that affected them (GoSL, 2001; GoSL, 2005). The PRSPs are official documents authored by national governments to secure funding and other support from a variety of international partners, and they contain commitments that bind governments to certain economic and political reforms to transform their societies after war. In Sierra Leone, promises were made to prioritise the "employment and income needs of young men and women in urban and rural areas", and to promote labour-intensive methods for the implementation of poverty-reduction programming (GoSL, 2004:98). Strategies would involve building capacity and providing training for unskilled or semi-skilled and unemployed youth, which would link them to job opportunities in the private and public sectors in both urban and rural areas. Youth strategies would also include creating the right structures for the social integration of young men and women into mainstream society, and for their participation in decision making (Ibid.).

Post-conflict realities for youth

It is estimated that 1500 000 young men and women make up the youth population in Sierra Leone and that underemployment is highest among

this group. Around 70% are underemployed and over half are illiterate and unskilled, and the majority live in urban areas. Over 60% of the population live in abject poverty, unable to afford one decent meal a day, and poverty affects the youth disproportionately (GoSL, 2009). The hunger situation is “extremely alarming” and it is unlikely that the country will achieve any of its Millennium Development Goals (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). Post-war conditions have been most challenging for the youth; they include exclusion from family life and separation from kinship networks, no access to jobs or education, frustrated attempts to get involved in the decision-making process, and oppressive traditional and cultural systems (UN, GTZ and World Bank, 2010).

Urbanisation

Urbanisation is a phenomenon hastened by the mass displacement of the population during the war, when people from all regions moved to cities for protection – especially to the capital, Freetown. The fighting factions recruited high numbers of young and very young. Subsequently, when the fighting ended, many youth were estranged or isolated from their families or village communities, making them vulnerable in terms of socio-economic survival. This was also the case for young people who were not involved in the fighting, who had fled from it, and who had found refuge, estranged from their families and communities, in the cities. It is estimated that almost a quarter of a million people displaced to the cities by the war were children or youths, who occupied themselves with petty trading or prostitution, or criminal activities including drug dealing and theft (GoSL, 2003).

Rural-to-urban migration remains one of the most difficult challenges for the development and engagement of the country’s youth. People continue to migrate to Freetown in search of jobs and better opportunities, improved education (especially at secondary and tertiary levels) and access to healthcare (UNDP, 2010). This migration has resulted in high numbers of people residing in overcrowded and unsanitary areas, creating “breeding grounds for crime, disease, [and] political and social volatility” (GTZ, 2010:4). The settlement pattern in Freetown is being reproduced in other major cities – including Bo in the south,

Makeni in the north, and Kenema and Koidu in the east. Young migrants bunch together in congested peri-urban neighbourhoods, transforming them into ‘youth enclaves’ of poverty, misery and despondency – “veritable mini-cities” inhabited by criminals that pose a security threat and retard development (GoSL, 2009:35). Post-conflict youth programming is therefore trying to reverse – or, at least, restrain – this advance by encouraging young people to stay in rural areas. For example, a pilot project in the underdeveloped north of the country is working to stop young people moving to the cities through a livelihoods and empowerment initiative that provide services targeted at ex-combatants and victims of war.⁹

Employment

Employment opportunities have been impacted greatly by the fragility of the Sierra Leone economy, which is based primarily on the export of raw commodities such as diamonds, gold, rutile, bauxite and iron ore. Finding work – especially in the formal sector – has proved a great challenge. Formal sector employment is small, occupying less than 10% of the overall population, and levels of unpaid labour are very high – with more than 50% of urban youth and 70% of rural youth involved in unpaid work (GoSL, 2009:38). Although agriculture potentially presents vast opportunities for employment, many youth – especially men – do not want to return to the countryside due to low returns from farming, poor living conditions, contentious relationships with landed elite or the fact that they have lost their rights to land by leaving their chiefdom of birth (Unruh and Turray, 2006; Peeters et al., 2009:16). There are also other arguments that explain why agriculture has not been as strongly promoted in youth programming as vocational training. During DDR, vocational packages included monetary incentives (a monthly allowance) as well as the provision of tools, whereas the agricultural packages did not, and agriculture was not always offered as an option by implementing partners. The case has been made that this may be to do with the fact that many urban-based elites – some of them politicians – have mining concessions in remote rural areas and require a

9 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

steady flow of cheap labour, which could be threatened by successful agricultural initiatives targeting the youth (Richards, 1996:48; Peters, 2011:200).

There are no accurate or reliable figures on unemployment; the concept is profoundly confusing and unclear in the Sierra Leone context as it embraces all sorts of sub-concepts such as ‘jobless’, ‘inactive in the labour market’, ‘somewhat unemployed’ or ‘active in non-market activities’ (Peeters et al., 2009). In the cultural context, the term cannot be understood in the same way it is used in Western developed states; although the government itself has claimed 70% unemployment among the youth (GoSL, 2009:98), this cannot be a reality because no-one can afford to be unemployed. Young people have to work, either for food or shelter, cash or payment in kind (World Bank, 2007). This work is usually casual, periodic, insecure and often hazardous, and can operate in an underworld of organised crime (GoSL, 2009:102). A more useful concept in the local context is ‘underemployment’, because the term ‘unemployment’ fails to capture the majority populace who work for perhaps only a few hours a day, or for very little reward, or who have several jobs – paid, unpaid, subsistence, for example – or who work seasonally, in the home, or who have their labour tied to landlords. Where youth do have employment of some kind, it is most visible in the agricultural sector, in the huge informal sector and among the self-employed (petty trading, carpentry, masonry, mining, etc.). The local private sector is weak and has limited capacity to provide employment opportunities, and contraction of the public sector due to liberalising reform has meant fewer jobs, or less likelihood of getting paid (Cubitt, 2011a).

Education and skills training

Illiteracy rates are high in Sierra Leone: around 53% of men and only 30% of women are literate.¹⁰ Due to disruptions during the war, many of the country’s youth were unable to complete – or even start – their education, and though employment opportunities do exist, they are generally for those who are highly skilled and educated (ILO, 2010). People have few employable skills and there

10 According to UNESCO. Available from: <<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/default.aspx>> [Accessed 10 October 2011].

is insufficient demand for the skills they do have (UNPBC, 2005:25). The low participation rates of girls in education and very low literacy rates among women continue to have an impact on the general development of the country and the education and security of future generations of children, as well as deepening the feminisation of poverty.

Mental health

Recent surveys have shown that there is an increased incidence of mental ill-health among the youth, generally attributable to post-war effects and substance abuse (GoSL, 2009:87). This issue is of particular concern given the gross understaffing in mental health. There is one specialist psychiatric hospital in the country, serving a population of six million; one consultant psychiatrist and only two qualified psychiatric nurses; and there is no psychology, social work or occupational therapy staff. Post-war trauma support never materialised, and any programming that was available focused on former combatants, not the majority of the populace where there was, and still is, a great need for counselling.¹¹ Anticipated increases in levels of psychological morbidity, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance misuse, psychosis and affective disorders highlight the mental health challenges ahead for the country, and increased drug abuse among the youth is a growing concern.¹²

Social status

Public perceptions of youth often act as a barrier to their employment. Characterised as lazy, undisciplined, unskilled and unreliable, they have fewer opportunities for salaried employment compared with the over 35s (Peeters et al., 2009). Youth stigma influences decisions made by employers about who

11 Interview with John Paul Bai, Independent Youth Forum, 10 August 2011.

12 According to Dr Oyedeji Ayonrinde (2008), Bethlem Royal Hospital, UK, visiting psychiatric nurse to Kissy Hospital, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Available from: <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/192/3/212.abstract/reply#bjrcpsych_el_26805> [Accessed 4 August 2011].

they take on. The age group 18–24 years is particularly vulnerable, as employers perceive this group as being less trustworthy and less cooperative than older groups. This is true of both males and females (Peeters et al., 2009:76). Public sector employment tends to exclude young people on the basis of their age and experience (Ibid.) and, therefore, formal employment opportunities are significantly lower for the youth, regardless of their skills or qualifications. Not surprisingly, the low status of youth and limited opportunities to advance breeds anger and resentment (UNPBC, 2005:25).¹³

Girls and women

When looking at the challenges presented by the youth, locally the focus tends to be on young men, overshadowing the challenges and problems faced by young women and girls, who suffered greatly during the war. Young women are often heads of households, and have limited access to education or formal assistance programmes developed by governments and aid agencies (UNPBC, 2005:27). Those who spent time in the bush with the various fighting factions have greater challenges, with this social stigma associated with their histories (Denov, 2010). Youth empowerment as a condition for peace includes young women and girls, yet cultural beliefs constrain their participation in programming. People want girls at home to look after children or the elderly, and they have other household responsibilities. Many training initiatives involve travel to other areas of the country – neither culturally or practically viable for women.¹⁴

Post-war response to youth re-engagement

In the aftermath of war, the youth in Sierra Leone wanted jobs, education, and skills training. They wanted opportunities to take control of their own lives and they wanted a government and leadership that could help them achieve their objectives (Ismail et al., 2009). In the National Recovery Strategy, promises were

13 Interview with Charles Lahai, Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organisation, 11 August 2011.

14 Interview with Anthony Koroma, Youth Minister, 7 October 2011.

made to support them in a number of ways including job creation programming and practical skills training, assistance for community development schemes, and better access to information about health, education and life skills (GoSL, 2002).

Government policy

The National Youth Policy, introduced in 2003, created the framework for supporting youth empowerment and participation efforts after the war. The policy related to engaging youth constructively so that they could contribute to the growth and peaceful development of the nation. However, it had little success due to the overwhelming post-war demands on government, which had limited capacity to deliver anything at all, and which had to focus resources on priorities elsewhere – security sector reform (SSR), for example, economic restructuring and the transformation of economic management, the re-establishment of local government and the rebuilding of infrastructure.¹⁵ The Youth Employment Scheme (YES) provided work opportunities across the country, but was slow to start (2006/07). With a budget of US\$16.7 million, the YES planned to employ 4 800 youth in public works, 16 000 in agriculture and food production and another 5 000 in entrepreneurial and self-employment activities (Ismail et al., 2009:45), but these numbers were a drop in the ocean compared to the youth emergency facing the country. The scheme lasted barely six months, and discontinued just before the elections of 2007. It was replaced by revised youth policies created by the new government under its Agenda for Change. Focused on poverty reduction, the Agenda for Change promised to promote youth employment and empowerment through the establishment of agricultural farms for youth, youth enterprise development schemes, and employment in public works (GoSL, 2009:22).

In its final report (2004), the TRC advocated for the creation of a National Youth Commission (NYC), but this was delayed until 2009 when an act of parliament was eventually passed. A commission was established in 2011. At

15 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

the time of writing, the NYC is up and running and, although inefficient in its administration, is providing youth-friendly processes and platforms for participation, and a commissioner who is committed to the job.¹⁶ Some youth workers in the field are a little cynical about the headlines the government is making with the inauguration of the NYC, suggesting that this was political campaigning for the elections, or even to please “the internationals”. Best practice is being garnered from Ghana and South Africa,¹⁷ however, and the commissioner is visual, vocal and promises strong commitment to the job. This development offers a unique and opportune moment for international partners to influence politicians and throw their full weight behind coordinated and relevant long-term policy to support youth.

National Youth Dialogue Forums allowed young people to get involved in all stages of consultation on policy that affected them, and more open political space was celebrated by the youth. The process was ‘youth friendly’ and encouraged young people to undertake nationwide research to feed into the various stages of policy planning and design. In response, research was conducted by youth representatives in all regions to input into the country’s revised youth policy; the subsequent report was presented to the government and disseminated among the population in the form of a compact disc (CD). One of the central concerns raised in the document was the general disrespect for youth concerns among the nation’s political elite. The irony of the outcome was that the recommendations put forward by the youth in their research were “not captured” in the final policy document,¹⁸ causing deep resentment among researchers who felt “slighted” at their attempts to participate in the political process.¹⁹

In terms of training and education, there was little distinction made between the various age groups, although their needs were disparate. The new NYC hopes to address this by categorising ‘the youth’ into more useful groupings. Those

16 Interviews with John Paul Bai and Keith Wright, country representative of UNDP, 17 August 2011.

17 Interview with Moisa Saidu, education coordinator, Amnesty International Sierra Leone, 10 August 2011.

18 Interviews with John Paul Bai and Charles Lahai.

19 Interview with Charles Lahai.

under 20 years are encouraged into school or other training establishments; 15–19-year-olds are therefore not targeted for specific training or employment interventions. Those aged 20–25 years old have been identified as the ‘core youth’ requiring technical, vocational and educational interventions to bring them up to the right skills levels. Those older than 25 years require enterprise development, self-employment initiatives and longer-term involvement in public works to live their lives successfully and support their families.

International partners

International partners – including the UN and many of its agencies, the International Labour Office (ILO) and World Bank – have held conferences and workshops on youth-related issues, forming the Youth Employment Network (YEN) and delivering youth programming on education, skills training and access to credit. The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), for example, introduced several projects for income generation, centred mainly on agro-industrial growth, while the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) launched a report on youth unemployment in the region, with several concrete recommendations (UNPBC, 2005). The ILO and World Bank also offered grants for youth projects. These included the ILO’s competitive grant scheme called the Youth to Youth Fund, which supported youth-led organisations and their employment initiatives, with rewards ranging from US\$5–US\$20 000 plus capacity-building support,²⁰ and the World Bank’s facility (involving a US\$35 000 grant in 2009) to support an ‘umbrella’ youth organisation in the country.²¹

There were concerns, however, that international initiatives such as these fell short of useful, sustainable and positive action on the ground. Many of their

20 See the Youth Employment Network. Available from: <<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/yen/whatwedo/projects/y2y/sierraleone/main.htm>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

21 See the World Bank. Available from: <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/SIERRALEONEEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22038687~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:367809,00.html?cid=3001>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

recommendations have yet to be put into place, with resources as well as political will being major problems. Locals complain that there is no accountability of international organisations and large amounts of money are wasted along the complicated chain of 'experts' involved in the process.²² There is also little room for creative thinking in terms of local initiatives; the dialogue is based on preconceived ideas and Western notions of appropriate reform (Cubitt, 2011b). For example, in terms of skills, current graduates lack the specialised technical skills being sought by the larger companies,²³ and post-war training programmes did not equip people in the right skills for the emerging labour market.²⁴ Thus, the illiterate or semi-illiterate, low- and semi-skilled youth were unable to find stable, long-term employment (GoSL, 2005:175). Successful community-led grassroots projects, such as the UNDP's youth employment programmes, which were positively assessed by the participants themselves, had a short shelf life due to limited budgets and short-term strategies among planners (UNDP, 2011).

Civil society

Support to civil society youth projects and to local youth groups was outstanding in its diversity and complexity. Political reform, codified in the PRSPs as democratic change, has created a more tolerant political environment. In turn, this has encouraged broad-based activity in all parts of the country.²⁵ A plethora of youth organisations have sprung up in response to the commitment by the national government to consolidate democracy by building a strong civil society,

22 Interview with Charles Lahai.

23 Interview with a representative of ADDAX, Freetown, 6 July 2011.

24 Interviews with M.L. Johnson of the Employers' Federation, Freetown, on 2 August 2011, and with Kandeh Yillah of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, on 30 June 2011.

25 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers set out the national government commitments to good governance and economic reform as a prerequisite for support from international financial institutions (IFIs). Without the commitments made in these documents, and some progress made against them over time (especially in the economic domain), national governments struggle to attract confidence and investment from multinational companies, and loans and grants from bilateral and multinational partners.

and donor support has helped in this.²⁶ The UNDP's Engagement Project supported capacity building, and offered training to increase organisational strength among youth organisations.²⁷ Other initiatives have included Youth Action International's development and empowerment projects for women and girls; World Vision's youth mediation peace programme; the YMCA Sierra Leone's educational projects on HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, human rights, livelihood support and skills training; the Independent Youth Forum's advocacy on all manner of youth issues, promoting the involvement of youth in the decision-making of the country; and Amnesty International's educational programming on human rights, using theatre and drama. Local civil society has been a central focus for the delivery of youth programming across the country. These activities have included literacy and advocacy, training on life skills, human rights, civil rights, health, finance, etc., and numerous empowerment projects – the central aim being to promote youth-led development in their communities. For example, the Safer Future Youth Development Programme has been involved in social and financial training, and the development of vocational skills providing training on solar energy systems and entrepreneurship to create employment opportunities in rural areas where lack of opportunities can push young people to migrate to the cities. It has successfully created self-employment for youth installing solar energy systems in schools.²⁸

Economic integration

The many domestic and international actors involved in post-conflict employment creation and income generation for the youth include public sector and governmental institutions – for example, the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) and the Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA) – private sector employers, district councils, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil

26 For further reading on international democracy promotion and civil society, see Carothers and Ottaway (2000).

27 Ibid.

28 Interview with Idriss Kamara, Safer Future Youth Development Programme, 10 August 2011.

society groups, and bilateral donors such as the World Bank and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit/German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (Date-Bah and Regni, 2010:30). There is overlap between the functions of these various actors, and there are questions about their capacity to deliver, the quality of their outputs and, indeed, the relevance of some of the programming (Ibid.). In partnership with the government, international agencies have developed various initiatives to boost youth employment – including cash-for-work labour-intensive public works programmes such as waste management, road building and maintenance, which are short-term but useful for absorbing the energy of large numbers of youth while providing temporary relief from deep poverty. They also have the potential to develop into longer-term, more sustainable, programmes of work but, as yet, the government and its partners have failed to convert them successfully (Ibid.). The most substantial short-fix cash-for-work programme involved funding of US\$10 million from the World Bank, to be delivered through the NaCSA under its Youth Opportunities Programme. Other programme interventions include activities at district and community levels, mostly targeted at agricultural production or food processing, training and apprenticeship and labour-intensive infrastructure projects, but also micro-credits and micro-franchises. These have been small scale, however, and have failed to reach significant numbers of beneficiaries (Ibid.:15). Farming and industry have had little support in employment programming, and young people in the agricultural sector have been especially neglected.²⁹ Archaic and opaque land tenure systems offer contractual arrangements that are not enforceable by law and are rarely understood by young farmers (Peters, 2011:205). Some programming has been gender-sensitive but much of it has not, and there are concerns that gender blindness in job promotion may lead to deepening the feminisation of poverty, as many heads of households are women (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010:16).

There remain very strong feelings among the youth about the lack of employment opportunities created for them by government. On International Youth Day 2011, this text was forwarded to a prominent youth leader in the

29 Interview with Mohammed Kanneh, programme coordinator, West African Youth Network, 10 August 2011.

country: “Tomorrow it is International Youth Day but I will wear black for my dissatisfaction and show there is nothing to celebrate.”³⁰ People feel that nothing concrete has happened regarding employment.³¹ Although some new jobs have been created from foreign direct investment (FDI) and development projects in the country, local people are not skilled enough to take them up (ILO, 2010) – for example, London Mining, which recently restarted its iron ore activities in the north of the country, is recruiting skilled employees from Ghana.³² The government and civil service do not have a programme for training new recruits and there are major issues around capacity constraints. Graduating students need to use their skills but get frustrated at the lack of opportunities available. And those who are educated at university are simply not captured in the job market³³ – they are emerging with the wrong skills or with skills that are inadequate or underdeveloped.³⁴ Illiteracy is also a huge problem, and exacerbates the difficulties experienced in skills training.

These realities mean that young people have involved themselves in autonomous economic integration – and the most successful of these local enterprises is the Okada Riders Association. Formed as an economic venture among the youth – many of whom are former combatants – with no outside interference or support, okada (motorbike) riders provide a valuable service to the community by transporting people to and from their place of work, both in the cities and across the countryside. Sierra Leone has a limited and poorly maintained road infrastructure and the cities, especially Freetown, are notorious for their congestion. In the absence of a good public transport system, okada riders offer a cheap way to get about town for local people – especially market women, who make up the majority of their customer base (Peters, 2007). This local enterprise is not only solving the local transport problem but is also addressing the dire underemployment situation among the youth. Okada riders have gained some

30 Interview with Charles Lahai.

31 Interview with John Paul Bai.

32 BBC report, 21 January 2011. Available from: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12249747>> [Accessed on 29 September 2011].

33 Interview with John Paul Bai.

34 Interview with M.L. Johnson.

respect among the community, and are able to support their own families; the enterprise has created over 150 000 jobs and is the biggest single employer outside agriculture, and jobs have also been created down the value chain.³⁵

This successful local initiative has not been without its challenges. Riders cannot always afford to buy the bikes themselves, and this makes their business vulnerable to elite capture (see Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). There have also been some restrictions put on the operation of okadas in Freetown, due to high numbers of accidents. Police clampdowns have resulted in hundreds of bikes being impounded and riders arrested.³⁶ The lack of regulation, including the licensing and insurance of okadas and their riders, has prompted calls for policy in this area so that the industry can be regulated and safety improved.³⁷

Young people get involved in other informal activities such as cash-for-work projects or they set up their own small businesses. They are key players in petty trading, subsistence agriculture, cross-border trade, vehicle repairs, car washing, hairdressing and tailoring (mostly women), battery charging and the sale of mobile phone top-ups. Some young people also work in the commercial sex industry, and a growing number are involved in the production of music (Ismail et al., 2009:56-7). Music is easy to access and is becoming more professional, offering good opportunities for young people to make a living and, at the same time, express their concerns in a peaceful way (Wai, 2008:57). There is also tremendous growth in the entertainment sector, which has created a variety of income and livelihood opportunities for young people, both male and female, across the value chain – in production, sound engineering, promotion, directing, video and CD production, sales and marketing.³⁸

35 Interviews with Keith Wright and Youth Minister Anthony Koroma.

36 BBC World Service (2010) Network *Africa Okada Clampdown*[Internet], 2 September 2010. Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/09/100902_sierraleone_motorcycles.shtml> [Accessed 5 October 2011].

37 Interview with John Paul Bai.

38 Interview with Youth Minister Anthony Koroma.

Political integration

The youth of Sierra Leone are very keen to express themselves through the formal political process, and democratisation has afforded them the opportunity for meaningful participation in the governance of their country (Ismail et al., 2009:10). The TRC called for at least 10% of all political party candidates in elections to be drawn from the youth, to increase their representation in parliament (TRC, 2004: Volume 2, Chapter 3, Recommendations, paragraph 313), and government now supports youth political parties, councillors and ward committees – these are secure spaces for expression and a great stride forward from the past. Decentralisation has allowed youth candidates to be elected local councillors, for example, which has enabled them to challenge the traditional authority of chiefs. Tensions do remain, however, as no-one is quite sure “who is on top of who” in terms of legitimate authority at local level – and this is especially so between the new youth councillors and members of parliament.³⁹ In addition, the space created in local councils for youth voices is not working well in terms of positive outcomes.⁴⁰

Multiparty politics has created ethnic tensions around the political process, but the youth have identified this challenge by creating their own All Political Party Youth Association. Women have also formed an All Party Association. In Sierra Leone, where you come from determines which political party you support: the north of the country is generally associated with the current government, the All Peoples’ Congress (APC); and the south and east of the country is generally associated with the Sierra Leone Peoples’ Party (SLPP). These ethnic differences now pose a new threat to political stability, because the politicisation of ethnicity has emerged in sharp relief with the advent of multiparty politics (Cubitt, 2011b).⁴¹ Although ethnicity does not usually cause trouble at youth level, during political events tensions rise because ethnicity is used as a political weapon.⁴²

39 Interview with Charles Lahai.

40 Interview with John Paul Bai.

41 Interview with Charles Lahai.

42 Interview with John Paul Bai.

The Mano River Union Youth Parliament is run by young people from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea (countries that border the Mano River, a region prone to outbreaks of violence) to discuss issues of national interest which affect them. The parliament is based on a constituency system, and representatives are heard at central government level. So far, its policy proposals have been rejected by the Sierra Leone government and participation is described as “a shambles”; politicians are accused of using the youth as ‘window dressing’ and do not include them in the design stage of policy making.⁴³ Indeed, national politicians try to divide the youth parliament along the same lines as national politics, bribing young people with promises of jobs or educational scholarships.⁴⁴ Nothing has changed dramatically in the cynical and negative view of young people, despite strong lobbying against it,⁴⁵ and the youth remain very dissatisfied with the political leadership.⁴⁶

Social and cultural change

To improve the problematic relationship between generations in Sierra Leone, literacy circles have been set up to promote better dialogue and improved understanding. Headed by chiefs, the circles provide community-level platforms for the different generations to interact in an informal way, and projects appear to be bearing fruit. These include a “strategic engagement with elders and young people” project, supported by international partners, which focuses on bringing about social attitudinal change. Another project, spearheaded by Amnesty International, educates young people for leadership roles, emphasising the point that they do not have to be an elder to be a leader.⁴⁷ Traditional issues are taken very seriously in programming, and social drama is playing a central role in educating people on better relations between the generations.

43 Interview with Moisa Saidu.

44 Ibid.

45 Interview with Mohammed Kanneh, programme coordinator, West African Youth Network, 10 August 2011.

46 Interview with Charles Lahai.

47 Interview with Moisa Saidu.

A new education policy in 1995 officially recognised the value of adult and non-formal education and a plan of action for 1996–2006 aimed to extend the reach of education to provide opportunities for youth and adults. The changes were formalised in the country's Education Act of 2004, which provides the legal basis for the provision of free adult education and literacy. Resources remain scarce, however, and there are issues around teacher training, the quality of learning and teaching materials, and the accreditation of providers and teachers. Several programmes, including adult literacy and vocational training, have been implemented across all regions – but most of the projects have been small-scale (UNESCO, 2008).

Basic literacy for girls has been targeted, and those in the northern and eastern areas have been deliberately sponsored for basic education because they have the lowest literacy rates in the country. A local civil society organisation (CSO), the Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organisation, prioritises girls and women in its programming, and community literacy projects are its central focus. Some donors – the Barings Foundation in the UK, for example – have provided programming for young mothers, but these have generally been unsustainable. Although there is plenty of rhetoric around gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity in youth programming, good evidence is yet to materialise among many of the activities being implemented (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). The 50/50 approach to participation, recommended by the TRC, is proving a great challenge as cultural practices, beliefs and traditions prevent girls and young women from taking up the opportunities that are offered to them.⁴⁸ DDR operations were conducted to the “near exclusion of women and girl” former combatants, but adolescent women and girls are sometimes leaders of violent protests and their exclusion can lead to crime and prostitution (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004). Local women's organisations helped to reintegrate young mothers after the war by providing foster care services for their children so that the young women themselves could go to school or skills training, and both UNICEF and USAID offered projects for their reintegration (Ibid.). It must be remembered that this group of marginalised young people, many with traumatic war histories, are the mothers of the next generation of youth. Women have played a significant but

48 Interview with Youth Minister Anthony Koroma, 7 October 2011.

unacknowledged role in the reintegration of former fighters, filling many gaps in official programmes. Female fighters who were children when recruited by rebel or government forces have been supported by women who have opened their homes, sharing resources, skills and advice (Ibid.).

A small number of youth programmes are focused on the arts, allowing people to express themselves through video, radio, drama or music. WeOwnTV, for example, continues to capitalise on young peoples' need for honest self-expression and encourages local youth to make their own documentaries and films, supported by free media training programmes.⁴⁹ Sport is also a most useful and convenient vehicle for marshalling youth energy, promoting peaceful dialogue and disseminating peaceful messages.⁵⁰ Parliamentarians have been persuaded to take part in friendly football matches against civil society representatives, and these have been successful in bridging some of the gaps between politicians and the youth.⁵¹

Very few post-conflict activities have been targeted at those with disabilities. The notable exception was a programme under the YES by Christian Aid for Under-Assisted Societies Everywhere, which focused on youth with mobility-related disabilities – a legacy of the war – who needed physical and functional rehabilitation to build their capacities for self-reliance (UNDP, 2010). This was an isolated project among a host of initiatives for post-war support to young people. It is hoped that the Disability Act, ratified by the government in 2011, will encourage affirmative action to overcome obstacles and barriers, including access to public facilities, transport, health and justice for the disabled.⁵²

49 Youth Media Reporter (2011) This is our generation: Sierra Leonean youth views through film. *Youth Media Reporter* [Internet]. 1 February. Available from: <http://www.youthmediareporter.org/2011/02/this_is_our_generation_sierra.html> [Accessed 6 October 2011].

50 Interview with Alu Sesay, Tangible Academic Youth Forum, 4 August 2011.

51 Interviews with Alu Sesay and Musa Soko.

52 According to UNIPSIL. Available from: <<http://unipsil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9611&ctl=Details&mid=12590&ItemID=11563&language=en-US>> [Accessed 3 April 2012].

Analysis of the impact of post-war activities

Given the significant focus on youth-based development, which has been manifest in Sierra Leone since the end of the war, it is important to analyse these initiatives in the broader context vis-à-vis the central concerns of the youth themselves: jobs, skills, education, opportunities and respect for them from authorities. What went wrong in the development and implementation of youth programming that made the majority of the youth populace so dissatisfied with the outcome, and how has the broader context of post-conflict reconstruction constrained more positive results?

Economic restructuring

All initiatives for post-conflict job creation have taken place within the framework of economic liberalisation, promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) as a condition for support after war. This has been done on the grounds that trade liberalisation, export-oriented growth and enlargement of the private sector will lead to economic stability, growth, jobs and a reduction in poverty (IDA and World Bank, 2005). Yet it is the case that economic growth is invariably delinked to job creation in much of the developing world (Nkurunziza, 2007). Due to the structure of the Sierra Leone economy – based mostly on the export of primary commodities – economic growth has not been pro-employment (Cubitt, 2011a).⁵³ As the state budget contracts under liberalism, jobs are lost in the public sector; at the same time, the removal of trade barriers floods local markets with cheap imported goods, reducing the demand from local small-scale producers. This impedes economic activity in the local informal and small-medium enterprise economies, reducing opportunities for youth (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010:24). The business-friendly government has promoted the expansion of FDI, but this remains volatile and sensitive to the local political situation (ILO, 2010). In any event, FDI is primarily invested in resource extraction – iron ore, diamonds and, more recently, oil – and the cultivation of agricultural products such as palm oil or sugar cane to produce

53 Interview with Keith Wright.

bio-fuels. Although these deals promised new jobs, they have produced very little in the way of quality employment, due to the high standards of education or skills required by employers (ILO, 2010). At the same time, 'land grabs' have ignited tensions across the countryside, because concessions to outside interests through outdated land tenure systems have benefited traditional authorities (such as chiefs) but marginalised low-caste labour and grassroots initiatives (ILO, 2010; Peters and Richards, 2011). For example, arrests were made following protests over land acquired for palm oil production in Pujehun district; violent incidents, which culminated in one fatality and several hospitalisations at the hands of the police, took place in Tonkolili district over wages and conditions in the iron ore sector; and farmers rallied in the capital, Freetown, to protest at the gross imbalance of power between rural communities and powerful foreign investors.⁵⁴ But rising tensions over large-scale agribusiness in the countryside and national protests over the power of investors, poor working conditions, low wages and land grabs, have met with resistance and denial from government.⁵⁵ Large swathes of prime agricultural land have been acquired by investors, robbing many local farmers of their livelihoods when, at the same time, the country's youth have been encouraged to return to the countryside to pursue agricultural activities. It is in this contradictory and challenging context that youth employment programmes have tried to gain traction; a situation that highlights the responsibility of international partners to get the right structures in place in their post-conflict statebuilding endeavours (Cubitt, 2012).

A single comprehensive and coherent employment creation programme does not exist in Sierra Leone (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010), and the markets themselves have not come up with the promised opportunities that liberal intervention claims to produce. Most jobs created since the war have been 'artificial' in nature (created by development agencies, not local or international markets) – or they

54 See Reuters News Agency, available from: <www.reuters.com>, and The Guardian Global Development, available from: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/apr/11/sierra-leone-local-resistance-land-deals>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

55 The Guardian (2012) Sierra Leone: local resistance grows as investors snap up land. *The Guardian: Global Development* [Internet], 11 April. Available from: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/apr/11/sierra-leone-local-resistance-land-deals/print>> [Accessed 25 April 2012].

have been short-term, small-scale, half-hearted and unsustainable. The failure of the economy to deliver jobs along with growth has meant a continuum of 'sticking plaster' economics – when government and development agencies intervene with funding and ad hoc strategies for quick-win projects rather than the local market generating its own demand for labour, which is meaningful and sustainable. There is virtually no access to micro-credit for youth initiatives, which undermines skills training in entrepreneurship. University graduates who wish to start small or medium-sized enterprises, or youth already engaged in business in the informal sector, find it nigh impossible to secure loans from commercial banks or micro-credit organisations, which consider them high risk. Young people have little knowledge of credit systems, and without bank accounts are not creditworthy (Ismail et al., 2009:48). In the absence of public works programmes or support for self-employment and entrepreneurship, and the failure of liberalisation to create jobs, the youth of Sierra Leone are expected to rely once again on the ingenuity of aid agencies to fill the gap. In reality, as we shall see, young people are creating their own opportunities.

The youth wanted good skills training and improved education to increase their chances of employment, but not enough thought was given to skills training and whether it would be relevant for the demands of the post-conflict labour market. Skills training in soap production, for example, did not take into account that local production could not compete with foreign imports, and graduates leaving university with 'soft skills' – such as human resource management, accountancy and peace studies – are not equipped for employment in the extractive industries, which require technical competencies.⁵⁶ The provision of adult education for youth who had missed out during the war was desperately weak, and exacerbated by overcrowding and poor infrastructure, and the meagre remuneration and low morale of teaching staff (Ismail et al., 2009:47). Frustrations were compounded by the ancillary fees charged by some schools and teaching staff when education was supposed to be free. Low educational standards made youth vulnerable to exploitation, removing their freedom to make independent and considered choices.

56 Interview with M.L. Johnson and ADDAX representative.

Political reform

All initiatives for political engagement have taken place within the framework of democratisation under a multiparty system, and have relied on the commitment of politicians to abide by the rules of the game. As noted earlier, multiparty politics in Sierra Leone is based on ethnic (regional) differences rather than ideological statements, and these cleavages have become more visible and more destructive since the reintroduction of multipartism after the war (Cubitt, 2011b). Ethnic differences have been exploited by politicians seeking to advance their own interests – yet ethnicity does not cause problems among the youth in everyday life.⁵⁷ The Okada Riders Association, for example, unites around class not ethnic differences (Peters, 2007). Whilst a wealth of programming and policy making initiatives and activities, and immeasurable resources, have been directed towards the reintegration of youth into peaceful society, politicians have been mobilising young, predominantly urban, men for election campaign ‘security services’ and general crowd control. The majority of those mobilised are former combatants; many recruited through still-active chains of command via high and mid-level commanders with army, government militia and rebel backgrounds (Utas, 2010). This ‘spoiling’ feeds off the vulnerability of the youth and is symptomatic of the country’s contemporary context and nature of governance (Ismail et al., 2009:11). In the absence of peaceful alternatives, political violence can be a way for youth to ‘engage’ and ‘participate’; sometimes “violence becomes a reality for their survival”.⁵⁸ It is within this context of toxic political culture and divisive political structures that youth programming for participation and empowerment has taken place.

The All Political Parties Youth Association has been spearheaded by the youth in an effort to get away from the imagery of violence and political intolerance, and to ease political tensions. This is an admirable attempt to stop the democratic process being undermined by spoilers, who manipulate vulnerable people for their own ends. Youth exclusion and vulnerability does not necessarily lead to violent outcomes, when young people channel their energies into

57 Interview with John Paul Bai.

58 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

collaborative and productive activities (Ismail et al., 2009:11). Despite post-war democratisation where good space has opened up for youth participation, the money-driven, corrupt, manipulative nature of politics and the socio-economic plight of the youth has meant their voice is weak and ineffective, and they are insignificant in the decision-making process (Ismail et al., 2009:38).

Organisation of programming

There have been problems with synergy, overlap and conflicting programmes among donors and government agencies (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). In the absence of coherent local strategies for youth development, international partners face difficult challenges in terms of focusing their support. People seem obsessed by processes at the expense of outcomes, however, and too much time and resources are absorbed in the coordination of disparate policies, strategies, plans and laws (Ibid.:22). There are estimates that around 1 800 local projects are geared towards youth employment or youth empowerment, but sustainable sources of project funding are a perennial challenge and coherence is lacking. Most state-led initiatives have minimal impact – a prime example being the suspension of the YES on the eve of the 2007 elections, on account of inadequate funding by donor governments and agencies (Ismail et al., 2009:44). Community-led projects are considered high risk by donors, but their own poor use of funds – or slow use of funds – has been identified as more of a hindrance to the successful outcome of local initiatives than the activities of some beneficiaries themselves.⁵⁹ In a study by the UNDP, the advantages and disadvantages of community versus donor empowerment approaches have been analysed. Conclusions were drawn that the disadvantages of the community approach were all faced by their development partners, not the local beneficiaries themselves (UNDP, 2011).

59 Interview with Keith Wright.

Autonomous responses for youth engagement

As national government and its partners have struggled to manage their resources efficiently, the youth of Sierra Leone have been busy developing their own initiatives for job creation – the successful membership-based Okada Riders Association being just one of them. Other autonomous youth initiatives have included the provision of security services in areas of the countryside where the national police are rarely seen and where there is a security gap. Some youth have organised themselves as ‘guardians of security’, working as private guards for small diamond operators, or policing local communities after dark to tackle fights and other disturbances (Baker, 2005:382). The majority of youth are committed to security and development, not violence and conflict. In the Freetown area, some youth work voluntarily to police the poorest settlements and, although there are mixed feelings among the local community about this practice, on balance their genuine commitment to the job has been acknowledged (Baker, 2005). This autonomous job creation, like the Okada project, provides a peaceful substitute to the excitement of war, it gives youth self-respect and a sense of purpose (see Peters, 2007) and, because it is grassroots, a sense of ownership. Solidarity through autonomous youth initiatives is a powerful tool when negotiating with government; horizontal collective action through strikes and lobbying (the Okada Rider’s Association hires a commercial lawyer to fight its cases) brings dividends for young people (Ibid.). Those in the provinces have formed community-based youth groups as sources of support, social control, socialisation, and for engagement with state and society. In the Makeni, Kenema and Kono districts, “youth groups are actively involved in peer education, self-advocacy, peace education, community development and recreational competitions, especially football leagues. Some of these groups embark on fundraising and advocacy campaigns to pay school fees or get placements in vocational training centres for their members” (Ismail et al., 2009:53). Shortly after the end of the war, in trying to overcome the difficult issue of access to land, young entrepreneurs – many of them former combatants, both men and women – negotiated a deal on wasteland in Tongo from a new chief who was youth-friendly. Tongo is a diamond mining town in the east of Sierra Leone, and the land negotiated was cratered and ‘mined out’ and of little

use to the chief or community. With some support from partners,⁶⁰ this small group of agriculturalists were successful in reclaiming former wasteland back to agricultural land. However, before the land could yield good harvests for the young farmers themselves, the land contract came to an end and it was the community that reaped the rewards of their labour (Peters, 2011:206).

Wartime displacement created a new sense of self-reliance among people of all ages which has, over time, reduced the levels of deference afforded chiefs and elders by the youth (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). People are doing things for themselves through craft organisations and trade unionism, especially in provincial towns (Peters, 2006), and have taken advantage of local opportunities the post-war environment presented for innovative and independent entrepreneurship. Labour cooperatives and social clubs, formed by the youth themselves, have helped a slow return to agriculture.

Conclusion and recommendations

Post-war programming for youth in Sierra Leone has taken place against a backdrop of unaccommodating institutional structures and attitudes, and has failed to address the main concerns – jobs, training and education, and an effective and respected voice in government. Explanations for these failures include the fragility and economic plight of the state, which has been overburdened with post-war demands from both local and international communities; the restructuring of the economy towards export-oriented growth, which has marginalised local markets and their potential for job creation and therefore constrained local development; multiparty politics, which has tapped into regional differences and been exploited by politicians who now mobilised support along ethnic lines; the lack of long-term, coordinated and accurately targeted commitment by international partners in the programming process and, finally, the continued pervasiveness of deep-rooted toxic political practices, cultural norms and stigma against youth, including lack of access to

60 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ).

land. It is with these factors in mind that recommendations for change include the following.

In terms of economic and political reforms, pressure needs to be put on global actors to rethink their methodology in post-conflict reconstruction programming and the way they visualise development. It is essential to adopt a more creative and locally based focus for the design of appropriate institutional structures, which can better support the development and peacebuilding plans of youth. For example, job creation schemes struggle to gain traction because there is such a weak local market to support them. What is needed is a more inward-facing economy to kick-start the local markets and create a better supporting structure for sustainable employment – but this sort of change can only come from the international institutions themselves that dictate the politico-economic shape of fragile states as they emerge from war. Serious reflection needs to take place on the wisdom of ‘too much’ FDI when local communities are losing out and land grabs are igniting tensions, and alternative local programming that has worked well for small-scale needs to be broadened, especially at community level.

In terms of political reform, multipartism has not been the best model of democracy to unite post-war Sierra Leone, as it has created a tinderbox of ethnic tension from hitherto (mostly) trouble-free regional relations. This divisiveness does nothing to help the country’s post-war development and consolidation as a nation, and pressure needs to be put on political elites to ease the tensions and remove ethnicity from politics. The youth need support in their excellent efforts to cement their solidarity and resist pressure from politicians. Supporting their capacity in this regard and improving inter-ethnic education will help ensure more peaceful elections. Education and awareness projects that focus on the potential power of new legislation – human rights, disability, employment and gender parity bills, for example – will help youth take advantage of legal advances and improve their influence and efficacy at national level, so that they can help themselves rather than rely on external interventions.

It cannot be stressed strongly enough how important relevant and high-quality skills training is for youth to take advantage of the economic opportunities that post-conflict development provides. In-depth research into local markets and

the needs of both foreign and local investors will help the design of appropriate programming. International support to educational and technology institutes, in the form of long-term teaching and training expertise, as well as equipment and structures, is paramount to increase levels of human capital and provide the right skills for the local job market. Standards of and access to education, especially for girls, need to be vastly improved, and quality control must be an essential component of the process. Again, commitment by partners to provide long-term and sustainable support through the provision of qualified, high-calibre professionals to support local teaching staff is paramount. A coherent strategy and long-term support for youth entrepreneurship through loans and relevant business training may help people to understand better and take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

Pressure needs to be put on government to push through the land reform act to help support sustainable youth livelihoods in the countryside and protect them from traditional or customary laws. Mechanisms need to be developed to prioritise access to land for young people and build upon current agricultural farm projects, by increasing the amount of government-owned land available to them. The inauguration of the country's new National Youth Commission is a unique opportunity for partners to support and guide coherence in national policy across all ministries, so that all available resources can be marshalled in a single plan and not wasted along the various chains of authority and implementing bodies. There is scope for more research on these issues, especially on the links between youth programming and economic growth, FDI and job creation, the international community and economic restructuring, and the role of local and regional markets for job creation.

This chapter has argued that the perception of youth as a threat to future peace and stability is false, because the greatest majority of youth are involved in peaceful struggles for empowerment, for opportunities and education, for respect and for prosperity. The most significant threat to security comes from the political elite, who control a small minority of them. Their exploitation of youth vulnerability means that hard-won peace remains uneasy and balanced on the whims and ambitions of spoilers to the process. The most encouraging signs of purposeful and successful youth engagement have emerged from

initiatives developed independently by the youth themselves. They are a bountiful resource for progressive change in their own right; as activists, heads of households, creative entrepreneurs and peacebuilders. It is, therefore, the role of the international community to create the environment that can help them achieve their own peaceful ambitions.

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