We Can't Eat Peace: Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods and the Peacebuilding Process in Sierra Leone

Ibrahim Bangura

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WE CAN'T EAT PEACE:
YOUTH, SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS
AND THE PEACEBUILDING PROCESS
IN SIERRA LEONE

IBRAHIM BANGURA

Abstract

This article examines the legacy and ongoing threat of historical neglect and marginalisation of youth in Sierra Leone, and the implications for the peacebuilding process in the country. This threat, embedded in the current socio-economic status quo, has bred energetic but disillusioned, violence-tested and frustrated youth willing to resort to any means for survival. Such societal vulnerabilities, stemming in part from young people's willingness to engage in violence, continue to test the resilience of the peacebuilding process. Underpinning this article are extensive interviews and focus group discussions conducted with youth and other relevant stakeholders across the country on issues related to youth and the peacebuilding process in Sierra Leone. Findings from this study provide new perspectives on the challenges faced by youth, the government's inability to meet their needs, and the implications for the country's peacebuilding process.

Keywords: youth, sustainable livelihoods, peacebuilding, conflict, ex-combatants and reintegration

Introduction

After three decades of chequered history, Sierra Leone became enveloped in 11 years of civil war leading to the deaths of over 50,000 people, while producing more than a million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Koroma 2004). Since the end of the war in 2002, significant efforts have been made by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) to prevent a relapse into violence by establishing and strengthening socio-economic and political systems and structures that are crucial to the maintenance of peace and stability. However, it appears that these systems and structures are plagued with challenges that have a negative impact on the peacebuilding process in the country.

Of particular concern are the country's youth who, while constituting more than half the population, have been neglected and marginalised over decades by subsequent governments (World Bank 2013, 14; Peeters et al. 2009, 1). As argued throughout this article, the history of marginalisation of Sierra Leone's youth poses a serious threat to the ongoing peacebuilding process in the country. This threat is predicated on the growing vulnerability of the youth, which has in the past and could again in the future lead to their mobilisation as agents of violence. This was the case in election-related violence in 2007 and 2012. Despite the ongoing and fragile peace process, what we find in Sierra Leone is

negative peace — a widely shared perception of those interviewed as part of the study underpinning this article. As expressed by the interviewee Pratt:[1]

> [W]hat we have is negative peace. It is not peace in the true sense of the word. There are too many underlying tensions and the most distressing concern is the despicable nature of the socio-economic conditions of youth. These conditions are entrenched in their unemployment, disengagement and marginalisation.

The absence of positive peace, in structural terms, is an indication that the root causes of the conflict have still not been addressed and that multiple segments of society remain frustrated and disillusioned. This has immense implications for the peacebuilding process, as negative peace signifies that peace is neither perceived nor achieved in the true sense of the word, and the potential for a relapse into violence remains.

The article provides new perspectives on how the reality faced by youth shapes their definition of and approach to peace, and the ensuing socio-political risks this raises. Prevalence of the pre-war status quo, characterised by poverty, illiteracy and limited livelihood opportunities has dampened their ability to secure their basic needs and to contribute to the growth and development of their society.

Methodologically, this article is rooted in the philosophical tradition of subjectivism, which assumes that knowledge is subjective. The theoretical approach underpinning the article is that of interpretivism, which advances the merits of interaction between the researcher and those researched (Summer & Tribe 2008, 59–63). Thus, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 600 youth (300 women and 300 men) between the ages of 18 and 35 across Sierra Leone from June to November 2015. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select the interviewees and participants of focus group discussions. Coupled with this, interviews were conducted with 40 officials from relevant ministries, department and agencies (MDAs) of the GoSL, including the Ministries of Youth Affairs, Finance and Economic Development, and Education. As well, 10 civil society organisations (CSOs) were interviewed and engaged in focus group discussions.

The article also draws from studies and reports on youth before, during and after the conflict in Sierra Leone. These studies and reports enriched the assessment of patterns and trends that have emerged over time and how they have been either handled or ignored. Thus, the study is of relevance not only to Sierra Leone but to other countries facing similar challenges.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the paper. The second section provides a short background in which the pre-war status quo is discussed, followed by discussion of young people's search for a place, livelihood and identity, and then also the country's civil war. The third section discusses the post-war reconstruction and peacebuilding processes with particular emphasis on activities related to youth and how they have succeeded or failed in opening the socio-economic and political space for young people. The fourth section focuses on the current status of youth and the re-emergence of political elites and godfathers who are exploiting their vulnerability. The fifth section discusses the implications of the current socio-economic status of youth on the peacebuilding process in Sierra Leone, and the potential for a relapse into violence if not addressed.

Youth and the Civil War in Sierra Leone

> What is peace? It means nothing because we cannot eat it. If there is no education, no job, no food on the table, peace means nothing. It is not the favourite word in our dictionary.[2]

Foday's words represent the reality and perspective of a significant percentage of Sierra Leone's youth who continue to live under dreadful and traumatising circumstances. This reality has marred the entire history of post-independence Sierra Leone. For more than three decades, the country has been continuously listed as one of the least developed in the world, with high rates of poverty, illiteracy and unemployment (Bangura 2013). Left with few options, with the outbreak of the war on 23 March 1991, vast numbers of youth joined the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and resorted to acts of violence that remain some of the worst in recent history (Koroma 2004, 272).

Two distinct strands of analyses have been used to explain both the causes and longevity of the conflict in Sierra Leone, both of which are of relevance to the country's young people. Poor governance and corruption have been widely argued to be the main factors responsible for the conflict, while the marginalisation of youth and the influence of natural resources are thought to have fuelled the extent of the conflict and the severity of its impact. In explaining local popular responses to decades of poor governance, authoritarianism and marginalisation by the centralised political elites, Mbawa (2013, 150) noted, 'A real challenge to the status quo — for mass democratic participation — was not to take place until the RUF — comprised mostly of radicalized leftist students and some "lumpen" youth started a civil war in Sierra Leone'. The RUF targeted mostly disenchanted youth as a deliberate strategy to fill their rank and file. According to Mbawa (2013, 150), this was a welcome move as youth were ready to fight against elite centralisation, corruption and rural isolation.

In as much as mineral resources fuelled the violence, there were deep-seated grievances by 1991 that made it easier for the youth to take up arms when the opportunity presented itself. Mistrust between the government and its citizens, augmented by the introduction of a one party system of governance that banned all forms of political opposition and muzzled the press, led to frequent confrontations between the youth and the government.

The desire to initiate a revolution in Sierra Leone was a vision of educated and not lumpen youth.

Not keen on understanding the aspirations of youth, the government resorted to using extreme force when dealing with demonstrations. This was the case during the 1977 and 1984 student demonstrations, which sought to draw the attention of the government to changes needed in the country. In both cases, the government responded by brutally killing several students. Consequently, the government's recalcitrance encouraged the mass exodus of students to Libya where they were trained in revolutionary warfare (Abdullah 1998; Koroma 1996). Hence, the desire to initiate a revolution in Sierra Leone was a vision of educated and not lumpen youth. At the time, it was widely believed that the government could only be removed through armed struggle.

However, the success of such an armed struggle could only be brought about through a mass mobilisation of disaffected people. Thus, the South-Eastern regions of Sierra Leone, which have been systematically ostracised for their unwavering support for the opposition Sierra Leone Peoples' Party (SLPP), served not only as the entry point but also as a

fertile recruitment ground for the insurgents. Several youth with limited options in life readily identified themselves with the aspirations of the revolution. As a result, while there was forced conscription into the RUF, most fighters volunteered to join, particularly in the early days of the conflict. Conteh,[3] who was among the first youth to volunteer with the RUF, described the pull factors. 'The government was the enemy of its people. They simply did not care about the people and the level of suffering and poverty was too high for me to stomach. I had no option but to pick up arms.'

Similar sentiments were expressed by Kalokoh,[4] who was with the RUF.

> I grew up believing that the government hated my people and deliberately pushed us into poverty. The RUF promised a way out of the jaws of poverty and an opportunity to revenge against the government …

For some people, it was not poverty that led to their involvement but rather the perception of being excluded and marginalised. This frustration was further compounded by the unwillingness of political elites to come to terms with the call by youth for their recognition and inclusion. As indicated earlier, two such calls by students of the University of Sierra Leone in 1977 and 1984 saw heavy-handed responses by the government. Consequently, such reactions shut down any possibility for dialogue and engagement with youth and others accused of being anti-systemic agents. Such conclusions deepened the animosity that subsequently dragged Sierra Leone into 11 years of conflict.

Richards (2003, 22) argues that 'wars are never static; they evolve over time taking on many forms and parameters'. Thus, as the conflict progressed, the RUF turned on its initial promise of fighting tyranny and dictatorship, and started abducting youth and using rape and torture as weapons of war. Richards (2003, 27) further stated,

> The RUF, though exercising strict discipline in their bush camps was grossly unruly during attacks, wreaking the worst havoc probably under the influence of drugs. As such, the war quickly became about waging terror on the innocent.

The practices and implications of such terror were devastating and widespread.

A peculiar characteristic of the nature of the conflict in Sierra Leone was the use of children and youth as soldiers. Even though the use of children defies international legal instruments and principles, the factions in Sierra Leone disregarded such provisions and made it their business to abduct and use children as combatants. The perpetrators of violence were mostly but not solely men, with a disturbing proportion being youth and preteen children. The practice of using children on the front lines apparently started with the RUF while other factions picked up on the trend as a countermeasure. Sadly, most of the recruited children grew up knowing only war as a way of life.

Key factors that appeared to have drawn fighting factions to recruit children and youth as fighters were their sense of loyalty, fearlessness, low desertion rate and low maintenance cost. Abducted by the RUF at the age of 15 in Kono, Amadu[5] recounted early conversations with his captors:

> They (RUF soldiers) said to us, we need young and strong people who do not have families to run to. We want people who have only the RUF as

their family. Children are our source of strength, not adults who are always thinking of running away.

However, the desire for children and youth to stay with the group depended, in the first place, on the reasons they joined the faction. Common reasons included 'poverty, unemployment illiteracy, socio-economic and political exclusion, peer pressure, culture of war, revenge and the breakdown of the social and moral fabrics of society' (Brett & Specht 2004, 3). In line with the motives for becoming fighters, Peters (2011, 141) stated the following:

> [W]ith exclusion and lack of viable opportunities and poor literacy levels, the power of the gun was the only means of survival. Youth, who had become legally criminal before corrupt traditional leadership, were inadvertently being driven to sign up with the RUF and when opportunities presented themselves, they had waged violence as retribution for the injustices they had suffered.

The war, and the reason for youth's involvement, became heavily rooted in the psychological causes and effects that created a victim mindset entrenched in years of neglect. This victim mindset was emphasised by Mbawa (2013, 135) as one of the reasons for the protracted nature of the conflict, and also a potent weapon used by the RUF as it 'characterised the pattern and trajectory of the RUF'. Mbawa (2013, 135) further noted:

> [T]he RUF specifically targeted, with brazen alacrity, the structures, powers, and symbols of decades of rural exclusion. In the towns and villages the RUF captured, it became a common practice to kill or publicly humiliate chiefs and other public officials as if to strip them of their despotic authority and make them ordinary.

The victims' mindset had a critical role to play during the entire period of the war, and the RUF, not oblivious to the growing exposure and reasoning ability of some of the recruits, resorted to tattooing the letters RUF on them. '[F]aced with certain death at the hands of the enemy or communities if caught, child soldiers would fight to the death' (Richards 2003, 14). This callous recruitment and retention tactic, peculiar to the nature and conduct of the RUF, had negative implications for the growth and development of the youth that were with them. It further prolonged the war, as the RUF had a steady stream of fighters willing to sacrifice their lives at any point in time.

As the war progressed, other factions such as the Civil Defence Force (CDF), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the West Side Boys emerged. The CDF comprised militia groups such as the Kamajors, Gbetis and Tamaboros, and was constituted of local hunters and community vigilantes who wanted to provide security to their communities. The AFRC was a military regime that overthrew the democratically elected government of Ahmad Tejan Kabbah on 25 May 1997. It formed a marriage with the RUF that continued even after the regime was removed from power by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1998. The West Side Boys was a breakaway faction of the AFRC and consisted mostly of youths. These factions also heavily resorted to the use of children and youth as fighters. Thus, by the end of the war, a significant percentage of ex-combatants were youth, some of which

had fought for most of their lives (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone [TRCSL] 2004, 235).

Post-War Reconstruction and Youth in Sierra Leone

From 1991 to 2000, several ceasefire and peace agreements were signed, including the Abidjan Peace Agreement (1996), Conakry Peace Talks (1997), Lomé Peace Agreement (1999) and the Abuja Ceasefire Agreement (2000). Inasmuch as the last substantive Peace Agreement (the Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999) was on several occasions heavily violated by the RUF and the West Side Boys, peace was eventually declared in 2002. However, in spite of the active participation of the youth in the conflict, they were excluded from participating in the negotiations leading to the signing of the agreement. At the same time, the agreement failed to recognise their wishes and aspirations. Each of these two points is discussed below.

To begin with, the agreement was overwhelmed with power-sharing provisions that benefited the political elites and dampened the hopes and expectations of youth. As stated in Article V of the Lomé Peace Agreement:[6]

> The Chairmanship of the Board of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development (CMRRD) … shall be offered to the leader of the RUF/SL, Corporal Foday Sankoh. For this purpose, he shall enjoy the status of Vice President … The Government of Sierra Leone shall give ministerial positions to the RUF/SL in a moderately expanded cabinet …

Abdul Rahman,[7] who was with the West Side Boys,[8] provides an account of those days, as follows: 'Our hope was usually tested by the sense of emptiness and despair caused by limited information and engagement on the part of the government.' The mixed feelings were not limited to former combatants, permeating the country's young and old. Oswald Hanciles,[9] Media Assistant to the President of Sierra Leone, described it in the following terms: 'Most Sierra Leoneans were unsure of what the future would bring, as there was limited trust and confidence in a system that had consistently failed them for decades.'

At the same time, years of corruption and bad governance combined with the war had, to a large extent, limited the capacities needed to provide the economic stability so crucial to the prevention of a relapse into violence. Furthermore, youth who were part of the war had developed easy cash habits and access to resources. Hence, this significant contextual shift was a rude awakening to many ex-combatants, some of whom had grown up in the bush and had no recollection of a normal life. As a result, there was a clear and immediate need for alternative sources of livelihood to be provided for ex-combatants. This was one of the stated key aims of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme for ex-combatants.

A total of 72,500 combatants were disarmed and demobilised as part of the DDR programme, including 4,751 women (6.5%) and 6,787 children (9.4%), of whom 506 were girls (Solomon and Ginifer 2008, 7). However, as Kamara (2012, 78) stated 'about 20,000 of the combatants could not access the programme, due to issues of stigma and retaliation from communities especially for former RUF personnel' (Kamara 2012, 78). Women and youth faced discrimination and were significantly affected by the eligibility criteria

for inclusion into the DDR programme, as set by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR).

The eligibility criteria were *youth- and women-unfriendly*, specifically targeting combatants who produced weapons and ammunition, while marginalising those who only played support roles. Such support roles included being cooks, spies, load carriers and wives of combatants, all roles performed largely by youth and women. DDR programme designers failed to account for those playing such support roles, all central to the maintenance and success of the fighting forces.

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Like ex-combatants, central to the post-war transition and reconstruction process were IDPs and refugees. In 2002, the GoSL established a National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement and Rehabilitation (NCRRR) to support their repatriation and resettlement. Despite having a meaningful impact on some beneficiaries, both the NCDDR and NCRRR programmes were fraught with challenges that included inadequate funds, ill-designed and implemented projects, duplication of efforts and limited political will.[10] One interviewee[11] provides the following insightful perspective:

> The programmes were designed and implemented as if the government wanted to tick certain boxes. The programmes should have been about the people of Sierra Leone and how they could be assisted in overcoming the challenges they faced in a country that was coming from a very violent conflict. They completely failed us.

In four focus group discussions held in Freetown, Bo, Kenema and Makeni, 76% of youth participants indicated that neither the NCDDR nor the NCRRR programmes succeeded in positively impacting on their targeted beneficiaries.

As part of the post-war reconstruction process, the government prioritised the establishment of key institutions, which included the Office of National Security (ONS), the Central Intelligence and Security Unit (CISU), the National Social Security and Insurance Trust (NASSIT), Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone (HRCSL) and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). Alongside these, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone (TRCSL) and the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) were established to seek redress for victims of the war. The SCSL specifically targeted those with '… greatest responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity and violations of International humanitarian Law'.[12] Thirteen persons were indicted, including Charles Taylor, President of Liberia at the time.

As the process of reintegrating ex-combatants ensued, Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) geared towards providing youth with basic cash and food were implemented. QIPs promoted the construction of schools, markets, hospitals, feeder roads, boreholes and community centres (Bangura 2013). These projects were perceived as ad hoc and providing only, and inadequate, short-term solutions to persistent long-term challenges. Illustrating this point, out of 150 ex-combatants interviewed who were of employment age at the end of the conflict, 135 were left unable to fend for themselves and their families a few months after the DDR programme came to an end. Then the reality set in; the scanty

training provided by the DDR programme could not provide them with sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Apart from DDR-related assistance to ex-combatants, several other national policies and programmes have been implemented by the GoSL and its international partners, to improve on education, employment and livelihood opportunities for Sierra Leoneans. These policies included the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) I (GoSL 2005), II (GoSL 2008) and III (GoSL 2012). Pillar Five of the third PRSP, also called the 'Agenda for Prosperity' (A4P), speaks to issues of labour and employment with a specific emphasis on youth. A Free Education Policy for primary school children was passed in 2000. Launched in 2003, the Sababu Education project established schools in most local communities. In 2003, the National Youth Policy was enacted, which established the Ministry of Youth and Sport, now the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA).

Key priorities of the policy include employment, microfinance and small enterprise development, agriculture, education and skills training. Furthermore, the National Youth Commission Act 2009 established the National Youth Commission (NYC), which works in collaboration with MoYA and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (MoFED) to provide support to youth development activities.[13] Coupled with this, across the country, District Youth Councils (DYCs) were established 'to allow for decentralised forms of engagement. Other initiatives include the Graduate Internship Programme which provides internship placement opportunities for new graduates'.[14]

When questioned on the impact created by youth-related initiatives, 63% of interviewees were not aware of such initiatives and had never been directly or indirectly impacted. Also, 27% of interviewees responded they were aware of some initiatives and had participated in either food or cash for work initiatives in their community. Finally, 10% indicated having worked with youth-related agencies, especially NGOs, and also having directly implemented youth-related initiatives. Overall, there appears to be a disconnect between the development of policies and programmes, and such programmes actually reaching and impacting the youth both in urban and in more remote and isolated communities.

There is very little tangible evidence of how youth-related initiatives have positively impacted on youth and made a difference in their lives, despite this being their very mandate.

Responses provided by youth in remote and isolated communities were similar to those provided by youth in urban areas. There is very little tangible evidence of how youth-related initiatives have positively impacted on youth and made a difference in their lives, despite this being their very mandate. There is very little tangible evidence of how youth-related initiatives have positively impacted on youth and made a difference in their lives, despite this being their very mandate.

In discussing youth-focused projects in Sierra Leone, a livelihood expert explained a methodological limitation in the way programmes were designed and targeted.[15]

> There appears to be a significant gap between the objectives of what could be said to be prescriptive programmes and the actual needs of the youth. Programme designers fail to undertake assessments, which are of intrinsic significance to the development and implementation of youth programmes.

During field consultations, more than 75% of interviewees stated they had never been consulted by any agency on youth-related issues. In designing and implementing activities related to youth, a better approach would have been to profile them, constructively engage with them on their needs, wishes and aspirations, determining how intended activities would be in their best interests and of use to them. Rather than doing this, some organisations based their activities on the pre-established purposes of available projects and funds, implementing them without first consulting beneficiaries.

The overall post-conflict reconstruction agenda appeared skewed towards 'hard' reconstruction, such as the establishment of institutions. Also, it did not go far enough towards improving the culture of governance, service delivery and the responsiveness of state institutions to the needs of the people of Sierra Leone. In too many cases, NGOs failed to respond to the needs of the population, including the country's young people.

A Frustrated Youth Claiming a Place

Caught in the framework of a paternalistic society in which cultures, traditions, systems and structures had marginalised women and youth, young people had sought new modes of engagement with the emerging reality of a country in transition. With the war, they played prominent roles in the fighting forces, and in some cases, in their communities too. After the war, their leadership was again constrained by multiple factors, such that signs of youth marginalisation started re-emerging in both urban and rural communities.

With the return of peace, many traditional leaders were reinstated into their communities, once again gaining control of communal resources (Peeters et al. 2009, 20). It was deduced from interviews conducted that in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country, youth were mostly relegated to carrying out the decisions of elders. Local authorities are very powerful and are immune to the challenges of young people. In discussing the dynamics between youth and elders in Kambia, Momoh,[16] an ex-combatant explained the following:

> To be safe and have a place in your community, one has to be quiet and never challenge the authority of the elders. The youth are powerless and thinking back on the reasons why I joined the RUF, which was to fight against the ill-treatments of the elders, we did not succeed in changing anything.

The re-emergence of the pre-war status quo led to a 'withdrawal syndrome' as youth tired of fighting the system developed strategies for personal survival. At the same time, youth spaces for expression and engagement continued to shrink, being subject to interference. A youth activist[17] discussed the point, stating that 'after the 2007 elections, youth could no longer openly critique the political elites as the government is not receptive to criticisms'. Thus, patronage and godfatherism have been the means of either control on the part of politicians or survival for youth.

Youth have not been blind to the fact of their being exploited by politicians, having been offered money, food, alcohol and drugs, playing on their vulnerabilities. They complain of the neglect outside electioneering processes (Fortune and Bloh 2012, 27; World Bank 2013, 21). In the headquarters of the two major political parties, the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), youth are seen hanging around

waiting for their godfathers to dash them paltry sums for food and cigarettes. Even the youth wings of these parties are tools of the parties' godfathers who have economic control over them.

Recently, local coffee booths called Attaya Bases have sprung up in Freetown and other places where unemployed urban youth spend most days discussing their frustrations and survival strategies. Expressing his views on Attaya Bases, Kamara,[18] a youth in Freetown said, 'We live our dreams in the Attaya Base. At the Base, you find very young, intelligent but frustrated people. Even though it is a sad place to be, it fills the vacuum created by the government.'

Alongside this, from the data collected for this study, 77% of interviewees expressed a lack of belief in the peace process, which they feel has not been youth inclusive. Thus, the neglect of youth has led to the development of a dangerous constituency with a mindset that has not embraced the peacebuilding process. The neglect of youth has led to the development of a dangerous constituency with a mind-set that has not embraced the peacebuilding process. This is detrimental for the peacebuilding process, as any violent upheaval by youth may lead to a relapse into violence. Indeed, excluding youth from peacebuilding processes, or at least, failing to engage them, creates an existential threat for such processes and for the country as a whole. As one interviewee explained,[19] 'nothing can save a country if its youth conclude that they have nothing to lose from fighting the system and Sierra Leone has not gone past that stage'.

> **The neglect of youth has led to the development of a dangerous constituency with a mind-set that has not embraced the peacebuilding process.**

It is worth noting that several countries have relapsed into violence because of their inability to address the root causes of a conflict. Also, persistent disengagement, disempowerment and marginalisation of youth, garnished by the perception of corruption by political elites, could be a recipe for renewed chaos, as was witnessed during the recent rebellions in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, known as the Arab Spring.

In commenting on youth and violence in Sierra Leone, Jalloh,[20] a youth activist, indicated, 'though youth understand violence to be bad, they would engage in it, to either save face, when faced with a threat or to benefit from the spoils of chaos and violence'. A similar assertion was made by Turay,[21] an ex-combatant, who said, 'we know what is good and what is bad but we are caught in a very difficult situation and sometimes we do things we are not proud of but we have to survive'. Specifically looking at ex-combatants within the current context, Bangura (2013, 105) stated,

> [F]or several ex-combatants who were the key targets of the DDR programme, life is not as good as they had hoped it would be. In fact … their lives are miserable and … they are worse off than they were before and during the civil conflict.

This draws one's attention to the words of Foday, 'What is peace? It means nothing because we cannot eat it', which strongly reflects the thoughts and perspectives of youth with unrealised dreams in a country that is still contending with its past, and unsure of its present and future. Like Foday, 83% of the interviewees presented frustrations and loss of faith in the peacebuilding process, emphasising the need for livelihood opportunities. Kalokoh,[22] a youth in Kenema, affirmed this perspective in saying that '[i]nstead

of supporting us with employment and education, all they tell us of is peace. What has peace done to bring me economic stability and happiness?'

Based on an analysis of interviews, it appears that the efforts of the government have not comprehensively addressed the needs of most of Sierra Leone's youth who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and destitution.[23] The efforts of the government have not comprehensively addressed the needs of most of Sierra Leone's youth who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and destitution. Weighed down by disillusion and frustrations, Koroma[24] boldly stated, 'If God had given me the choice between being a flower planted in Europe and to be born in Sierra Leone, I would have chosen to be a flower in Europe because I know that at least I will be watered daily.' While this appeared funny and indeed laughable when uttered, it presents a vivid picture of how low the confidence in the state is, and the negative implications for the peacebuilding process. It also raised the question of youth migration as a means of escaping poverty and insecurity.

A senior official at the Department of Immigration claimed that 'Sierra Leone in the past three decades has witnessed mass migration of especially the cream of its youth who seek greener pastures and security in other parts of the world'.[25] Of the 600 youth interviewed, 575 stated they would travel out of the country as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Reasons proffered for the need to migrate include poverty, limited economic opportunities, marginalisation and lack of faith in the system. The 25 that are unwilling to travel said they were scared of the uncertainties of what travelling and living in another country might entail.

The efforts of the government have not comprehensively addressed the needs of most of Sierra Leone's youth who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and destitution.

Such a mindset presents an existential threat to the country's peacebuilding process as it portrays desperation and vulnerability. It raises the question of how strong the peacebuilding process actually is in Sierra Leone. Is it creating the necessary impact that will save the country from a relapse into violence? How far has the process gone in addressing the root causes of the conflict and meeting the demands and aspirations of youth? These are fundamental questions that Sierra Leone's political elite needs to answer. Bah,[26] a university lecturer and lawyer, stated that 'the Government of Sierra Leone has continuously failed to understand that peace should be looked at within the broader sense of human security, and activities undertaken to strengthen peace have to promote a peaceful mindset of individuals'.[27] Bah's words are congruent with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) mantra, 'Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed' (UNESCO 1945, 1). However, for the defences of peace to be constructed in the minds of especially the youth, the government has to move beyond lip service and business as usual to constructively responding to the needs of its youth.

A country with close to half of its population being young, restless, unemployed and illiterate faces a massive challenge in maintaining stability. As Mbayo,[28] a street trader, summed it up:

> Peace' is a mere word which can only make sense when people are happy with the lives they live. In Sierra Leone, the youth are not happy. We want to eat good food, be educated and have job security. This is possible if the government stops corruption and uses the country's resources on us, its citizens.

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Conclusion

While Sierra Leone has made tremendous strides in its transition from violence to peace, the sustainability of these gains is predicated on cultivating continued stability. This article examined the legacy of historical neglect and marginalisation of youth, which continues to pose a serious threat to the peacebuilding process. This threat is hinged on the potential for a relapse into violence should the grievances and frustrations of youth not be addressed. This has been exacerbated by the extent of public outrage over the slow pace of change, not just around issues of education and unemployment, but in terms of the perception of widespread corruption and its consequent effects on youth. Alongside this, poverty, illiteracy and marginalisation entrench the exposure of youth to violence and chaos. Thus, the existing socio-economic conditions have bred energetic but disillusioned, violence-tested and frustrated youth with little to lose in the face of chaos.

Instead of seeking pragmatic and holistic solutions to education, unemployment and livelihood issues, political elites continue to use youth as instruments of coercion and violence. Thus, the peace in Sierra Leone appears to be threatened, especially as the country is moving towards general elections in 2017/2018. It is vital to note that while peace may not be 'edible', it provides an environment conducive to development and growth, which promise economic and social security for the youth. However, for peace to gain firm roots, the governance system has to work in the best interests of every Sierra Leonean. When that is achieved, then the fruit called 'peace' will become tasty in the mouth of Sierra Leone's youth.

> **While peace may not be 'edible', it provides an environment conducive for development and growth, which promise economic and social security for the youth.**

IBRAHIM BANGURA has worked extensively in the fields of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants, security sector reform, sustainable livelihoods, gender and conflict resolution. He currently works as a consultant and also lectures at the Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, University of Sierra Leone.

Disclosure Statement

Endnotes

[1] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 8 September 2015.

[2] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 7 September 2015.

[3] Author's interview conducted in Kenema on 13 September 2015.

[4] Author's interview conducted in Kenema on 12 September 2015.

[5] Author's interview conducted in Kono on 6 August 2015.

[6] See http://www.sierra-leone.org/lomeaccord.html

[7] Author's interview conducted in Makeni on 1 September 2015.

[8] The West Side Boys is a splinter group of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) after the regime was kicked out of power and Freetown in 1998 by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

[9] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 10 September 2015.

[10] Based on author's interview conducted in Freetown on 3 July 2015 with a Socio-Economic Reintegration expert who worked on the DDR programme in Sierra Leone.

[11] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 8 September 2015.

[12] See www.scsl.org, accessed 7 October 2015.

[13] See the National Youth Commission Act of 2009.

[14] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 1 October 2015 with a senior official of the National Youth Commission.

[15] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 14 October 2015.

[16] Author's interview conducted in Kambia on 15 October 2015.

[17] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 30 September 2015.

[18] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 30 September 2015.

[19] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 30 October 2015 with Kalokoh, a teacher.

[20] Author's interview conducted in Kailahun on 3 October 2015.

[21] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 13 October 2015.

[22] Author's interview conducted in Kenema on 13 September 2015.

[23] The outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) in Sierra Leone in 2014 had a negative impact on the economy and by extension worsened the socio-economic status of youths. In trying to contain the virus, most economic activities were suspended with a State of Emergency declared in June 2014.

[24] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 19 August 2015.

[25] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 14 October 2015.

[26] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 19 September 2015.

[27] Author's interview conducted in Freetown on 19 September 2015.

[28] Author's interview conducted in Pujehun on 4 October 2015.

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