Youth, Empowerment and Long-term Peace Consolidation: The Case of Sierra Leone.

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When considering the findings of the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the Commissioners acknowledged how the economic disenfranchisement of youth undeniably contributed to the outbreak of violence and eventual civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). Years of education and employment inopportunity compounded, plaguing a majority of the population and by the 1990s the acute level of social immobility led many youths to join the fighting. Despite efforts to redress these issues in the post-conflict setting and over the last two decades, the socio-economic marginalisation of youth remains. Moreover, there continues to be a level of apprehension and negative perceptions by the wider population around youth and the inherent threat that they represent. This paper raises questions of how ongoing educational and employment barriers alongside continued negative perceptions of youth affect long-term peace consolidation in contemporary Sierra Leone.

KEY WORDS: Sierra Leone, Post-conflict peacebuilding, Positive Peace, Youth Empowerment, Idle Youth, Economic disenfranchisement

The 1980s saw significant structural shifts across the global powers with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The abandonment of superpower influence in emerging democracies created significant instability throughout much of the developing world, particularly the African region (Teitel 2003: 71). The conflicts which ensued, the majority of which were internal, resulted from a myriad of social causes associated with greed and/or grievance, as suggested by Collier and Hoeffler (2002: 14). They acknowledge that poor governance and economic mismanagement were largely responsible for the emergence of both greed and grievance and also provided the motivation for many insurgent forces (Collier and Hoeffler 2002: 17). Certainly, these factors contributed to the discontent which led to the commencement of fighting in Sierra Leone, West Africa. As such, the eventual peace consolidation efforts which were required moved beyond the first parameters of peacebuilding, addressing both traditionally understood security threats, and the underlying socio-economic issues which led to violence.

Authors such as Lambourne argue that transformative justice is required in order to address both traditionally viewed security threats and the underlying socio-economic causes of violence. Building on conflict transformation, a transformative justice process addresses all aspects of peace during the post-conflict peacebuilding process, aligning with Galtung's analysis of peace (Lambourne 2014: 22). Since the publication of Galtung's seminal work in the 1960s, it is widely understood that peace operates on multiple levels. He argued that 'peace' can refer to

'negative peace' as the absence of violence, and also to 'positive peace' as a removal of structures and injustices that allow for violence to persist (Galtung 1969: 183; Galtung and Fischer 2013: 173). More recently, scholars such as Lee, Mac Ginty and Joshi (2016: 493-494) have re-categorised Galtung's peace typology to include 'social peace' and 'security peace', to better articulate how socio-economic issues are just as legitimate as traditionally viewed threats when seeking to understand what constitutes peace or its absence.

According to Lambourne (2014: 22), this re-categorisation directly informed how peacebuilders can address all aspects of reconstruction and reconciliation under the notion of 'transformative justice'. As such, transformative justice is much broader than legal justice or accountability, extending to cover truth or psychosocial justice, socio-economic justice and political justice. To promote a broader sustainable approach to long-term peace consolidation, the peacebuilding process should benefit from adopting a transformative justice perspective to address underdevelopment, economic stagnation and other socio-economic causes of state destabilisation. In other words, proponents of transformative justice are arguing for a total transformation of society. This is particularly important considering the high rate of relapse for post-conflict states as demonstrated by Caplan (2020: 312) and Call (2012: 52).

Sierra Leone has remained relatively peaceful since the conflict's conclusion in 2002, so it is well positioned for a

longitudinal examination of long-term peace consolidation. Through employing transformative justice as the measure of analysis and a combination of interview material and pre-existing literature, this article examines how socio-economic youth disenfranchisement continues to damage long-term peace consolidation. A level of 'social' peace has survived in Sierra Leone despite remarkably little change in institutions or movement towards socio-economic justice. This article primarily focuses on male youth and their access to education and income generation whilst acknowledging that a separate study of young women would be very valuable. This text also examines how negative perceptions of youth and the labelling of them as 'idle' and 'lumpen' not only impacts community relations, but also perceptions of social peace.

Background

From 1991 until 2002 Sierra Leone experienced a humanitarian crisis and mass violence as the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL) led by Foday Sankoh waged war against the government. The eleven-year-long conflict resulted in at least 50,000 casualties, thousands maimed (mostly resulting from the RUF/SL directed amputation campaigns), and half of the population internally displaced (Ferme and Hoffman 2004: 77). Forced child recruitment and systematic sexual violence were amongst the grave crimes perpetrated and normalised by all armed groups involved.

The multifaceted conflict resulted from the compounding of political, economic and social failings deeply entrenched within the framework of the state. Divisive political practices by the two major political parties, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the All People's Congress (APC) supported clear ethno/regional political lines. It was the norm that ethnic groups in the south-east would vote for the Mende-aligned SLPP, whilst the Temne and Limba, located in the north, supported the APC (Kandeh 1992: 92; Allie 1990: 230). The 1967 election of the APC made these divisions more pronounced as the newly elected President Siaka Stevens quickly filled his ministerial cabinet with Temne and Limba elite and enacted policies favouring the northern districts (Mboka 2010: 124). Stevens actively reduced the Sierra Leone Army's budget, largely replacing it with his personal guard, further disenfranchising those located in the south of the state (Kandeh 1999: 352). By the mid-1970s Stevens dismantled all opposing political parties, instead opting for a one-party system (Kandeh 1999: 352). In 1986 the presidency was passed to Brigadier Joseph Saudi Momoh, allowing the cancerous practices to continue (Davies 2010: 69). The 'kleptocratic' Momoh government is often blamed for the conflict, however, as Kandeh argues, 'by the time that Siaka Stevens hand-picked Brigadier Joseph Momoh to succeed him in 1986, the state was already on the verge of collapse' (1999: 352).

Corruption coupled with economic mismanagement and external pressures led to the collapse of the Sierra Leone economy, shrinking the already limited formal employment sector (Reno 1996: 8). This had a profound effect on the livelihoods of the youthful Sierra Leonean population as both education and employment opportunities were highly limited. Scholars agree that the high level of youth involvement in the conflict resulted from the socio-economic injustices pervasive in all aspects of life. The phrase 'crisis of youth' coined by Richards (1995: 135) has become synonymous with the mobilisation of disenfranchised youth in both Sierra Leone and neighbouring Liberia.

Since the 1950s access to education for the wider population had steadily diminished. This was further compounded during the 1980s alongside exorbitant tuition fees, and the official education budget was slashed, resulting in mass school closures, layoffs, and an exodus of teaching professionals (Zack-Williams 1990: 27). Frustration grew as President Momoh dismissed criticism, retorting that 'education is a privilege, not a right' (Richards 1996: 19).

With the collapse of the raw material market, formal unemployment figures climbed beyond 70% (Conteh-Morgan 2006: 99). Unemployment in the informal employment sector was high and increasing but not recorded in the statistics. Even in formal employment there was no guarantee of receiving a proper wage, as the Sierra Leone Army suffered poor pay and working conditions (Abraham 1997: 102). Consistently the literature acknowledges how the RUF/SL exploited the extreme sentiments of disenfranchisement experienced by the young population. Disenfranchisement can have many interpretations. Here it is primarily understood as economic disenfranchisement and the resulting social alienation. The inopportunity of both employment and access to education directly affected socio-economic development and social mobility. This undermined young people, leading towards social alienation within the wider community, impacting all aspects of their lives. For example, Richards (2005: 576) identifies that there is a direct correlation between community-based corruption, economic disenfranchisement and marriage opportunities at the time, leading many to join the RUF/SL in response to the marriage bottleneck in rural and remote areas. The RUF/SL directly preyed upon such discontents when recruiting youth, providing camp education and promising government jobs with good salaries after victory (Nuxoll 2015: 3; Kposowa 2006: 43). The focus on holding the APC government accountable for social injustices created considerable support from the wider community during the early years of the conflict, however, this support gradually diminished as fighting continued (Kaifala 2016: 224).

The violent nature of the conflict also created a shift in the societal perception of youth. Scholars such as McIntyre and Thusi (2003: 73) and Abdullah (2002: 23) argue that the lack of life prospects resulted in youths becoming complicit in violence and criminal activities, resulting in the emergence of what came to be referred to as 'idle' and 'lumpen' youths. Abdullah states that 'by lumpen, I refer to the largely unemployed and unemployable youth, mostly male who live by their wits […] They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness and gross indiscipline' (1998: 207-208). Discussing 'idle youths' Reno (2003: 54) lists similar traits. However, not all youths experiencing this disenfranchisement became engaged in violence and other questionable acts. Rather the unfavourable climate of disadvantage perpetuated the habits of those who already demonstrated anti-social tendencies (Abdulla et al. 1997: 176). Whether the 'idle' and 'lumpen' youth were as pervasive as the literature suggests, the disenfranchisement and the ultra-violent atmosphere of the conflict had a lasting effect. The post-conflict reconstruction efforts needed to address the underlying social issues to prevent youths transforming into violence and securitised threats.

Youth and Disenfranchisement in the Immediate Post-Conflict Setting

The Sierra Leone civil war ended in 2002, thus commencing a long period of reconstruction (Penfold 2005: 549). Fighting had redefined communities, altered family dynamics and complicated everyday life making peacebuilding a complex and difficult task.

A high priority was given to addressing massive levels of youth disenfranchisement. Through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) the transitional justice process attempted to promote social peace through socio-economic recommendations. The Commissioners acknowledged that:

> The civil war has aggravated matters for the youth. After ten years of war, thousands of young men and women have been denied a normal education and indeed a normal life. Their childhood and youth have been squandered by years of brutal civil conflict. Many young Sierra Leoneans have lost the basic opportunities in life that young people around the world take for granted. These young people constitute Sierra Leone's lost generation. The Commission recommends that the youth question be viewed as a national emergency that demands national mobilisation. This is an imperative recommendation (TRC 2004: 166).

Following recommendations provided by the TRC, efforts to rectify access to education were made, for example

primary school was made both free and compulsory for all Sierra Leoneans (TRC 2004: 177). However, implementation was difficult due to the significant level of education infrastructure damage which had occurred during the fighting. Still there was a swell of interest in formal education, in what Paulson viewed as 'education resilience manifested':

> Many schools built additional classrooms blocks and moved to double-shift operation. Some of the most prestigious secondary schools in the country took on pupils "from what would be considered very sub-standard schools" (Wright, 1997, p. 27) and did so fairly successfully. New schools were opened for displaced children by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious bodies and private organizations (Paulson 2006: 339).

There was an informal, parallel education system created with the establishment of community-operated schools, that were operated without government support by the community and at times with assistance from NGOs (Paulson 2006: 340). Aside from the lack of infrastructure, the professional teaching vacuum already present prior to the conflict had been exacerbated by the intentional targeting and killing of educators during the conflict (Smith Ellison 2014: 199). Similarly, there was a large number of adolescents who had been unable to receive even the most basic education. In response, several accelerated learning programs were implemented, such as the Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools. This program provided accelerated teacher training to new educators as well as an accelerated two-year-long course to those older than primary school age (Smith Ellison 2014: 199).

Beyond the education efforts and despite the SL TRC recommendations, the negative perceptions of youth remained palpable throughout the post-conflict period. Those involved in the peacebuilding efforts noted serious concerns around youth; 'heavily armed, angry and idle, they embodied crisis', and a tangible threat to the peacebuilding efforts (Hoffman 2003: 296). Despite the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) efforts attempting to demilitarise the minds of adolescent ex-combatants, there was a fear that they would fall back into anti-social and the negatively perceived 'idle' tendencies (Wai 2021: 519). During fieldwork interviews I engaged with several interviewees who had experienced adolescence during the conflict and post-conflict period[1]. For example, George (pseudonym) explained how even those who did not fight had the capacity for violence.

> The way they reacted was violent, even those that were not directly involved. All of us knew violence,

we saw violence […] so as a result the minds were violent (George 2019).

The tense atmosphere and general confusion during post-conflict meant that all youths appeared to represent threats to security. Significant and wide-spread rural-to-urban migration resulted in a concentration of war-affected youth in urban spaces (Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010: 255). UN Peacebuilders were vocal in their concerns that congregation of disenfranchised youths would result in ghettos and enclaves of lawlessness, allowing for a continued atmosphere of idleness and lumpen-ness to permeate.

> Many people involved with the mission have repeatedly voiced concern about the thousands of 'idle youth' prone to violence and without any prospects in life. They worry that these youth present a security threat if their future and needs are not taken care of. They fear that youth might easily destabilize the country. These concerns are genuine if one considers that historically youth have been a target for mobilization in Sierra Leone's conflicts (McItyre and Thusi 2003: 78).

Despite such fears that areas located in Freetown such as Magazine, Sawa Grounds, Lumley Road and Regent Street were becoming pockets occupied by loitering war-affected youths, these concerns were largely baseless (Bøås et al. 2008: 47). Rather, Sierra Leone has remained relatively peaceful, representing an outlier to other post-conflict states (Caplan 2020: 312).

The 'Crisis of Youth' in Contemporary Sierra Leone

Despite Sierra Leone's continued peace, remnants of the 'crisis of youth' persist. Youth disenfranchisement remains pervasive, as socio-economic causes of the conflict such as lack of education and employment continue to be areas of concern.

Education was severely disrupted in 2014 as the government enacted state-wide school closures lasting nearly an entire scholastic year, in response to the outbreak of Ebola. During this time, efforts were made to continue providing learning opportunities via the free-to-air broadcast system through the Emergency Radio Education Program (Powers and Azzi-Huck 2020). The joint program between the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education broadcast taught maths, English and civil education. However, it remains unclear how many participated and how successful the program was (GPE Secretariat 2020). Despite the reopening of schools in 2015, there was a noted decrease in re-enrolments as

many secondary school students did not return to the classroom (Bandiera et al. 2020: 2).

Education retention and overall costs remain obstacles for many Sierra Leone students, so to rectify this the government implemented the Free Quality School Education (FQSE). Announced by the Maada Bio government in 2018, the FQSE scheme implemented several unrealised SL TRC recommendations by making all stages of education free and reducing the cost of certain schooling necessities (Kamara 2020: 175). However, the initial months of the program noted a serious hurdle, in that the scheme did not include community-operated schools (Kamara 2020: 175). Despite this important caveat, initial press around the FQSE resulted in assumptions in many communities that the removal of tuition fees included community-operated schools. The misinformation around the scheme led families to refuse to pay fees associated with community-operated schools in rural and remote areas, resulting in their abrupt closure. As the FQSE scheme was being implemented while I was in Sierra Leone for research fieldwork in Sierra Leone, the scheme quickly became a talking point when interviewing those working in the education sector. Georgieta (pseudonym) worked alongside a number of education specific NGOs and witnessed these school closures first-hand.

> We've had loads of issues like […] none of the community teachers turning up anymore because the local community heard on the radio that it's free education and so they stopped paying their community teachers […] so the community teachers can't teach because they need to earn an income so they went back to work on their farms or went to work in government approved schools or whatever […] Schools closing or like only two teachers instead of four teachers turning up so classes 1 to 6 in all the same classroom are being taught by one teacher and I mean I'm not saying that the conditions were good before, but that's even worse. And lots of people are a bit scared because a few teachers got arrested for taking money and so lots of communities and teachers said that they're really worried that they may get caught (Georgieta 2019).

Whilst efforts to rectify this failing have occurred, considerable damage has been done in rural and remote areas where accessibility was already severely limited. Moreover, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic schools were once again forced to close, which inevitability resulted in a lack of data rendering the success of the FQSE unclear.

Regarding income generation and employment, as Bangura (2016: 40) explains, the limited employment

opportunities in the post-conflict setting raised concerns about the success of long-term peace consolidation efforts. This was further exacerbated by the failure of the DDR process to provide adolescent ex-combatants with adequate and long-term employment opportunities, so that many turned to informal employment (Knight 2008: 42). The *okada* (*motorbike taxi*) industry quickly became popular with many as it provided an avenue of income generation, whilst filling the transportation vacuum resulting from the conflict. Despite the *okada* industry providing a vital service it remains a part of the informal economy, susceptible to its unpredictability and lack of safety nets, as well as the influence of elites within the industry.

Additionally, many were skeptical of the capacity of *okada* to undermine the purpose of the demobilisation process and reinstate an ex-combatants' militarised identity. For instance, Menzel (2011: 100) raises the concern that the *okada* industry could present an avenue to 'combatinise' civilian youths and remilitarise ex-combatants. Conversely, some in the industry noted the opposite, with the service having a significantly positive effect on fostering post-conflict community relations. For instance, surveys found that working in the industry removed negative perceptions around ex-combatants and instead provided them with a sense of personhood and community (Buccitelli and Denov 2017: 139; Büürge 2011: 60). Others noted that the industry continues to be a vital crutch, fostering community relations and personhood for disenfranchised youths (Jenkins et al. 2020: 138). This suggests that perspectives reported by Menzel could be perceived as reflecting ongoing negative perceptions of 'idle' and 'lumpen' youths and the capacity of male aggression rather than the industry itself.

During numerous interviews in which themes of youth disenfranchisement were examined I asked interviewees what they identified to be the main areas of concern for both male and female youth. Interviewees expressed and explained the wider community's concerns regarding the ongoing disenfranchisement and weak investment in the youth population and the use of negative terms such as 'idle' and 'lumpen'. The National Youth Policy had attempted to address ongoing issues of widespread unemployment and under-employment (Alemu 2016: 16). Overall, the vocational skills training efforts provided were severely underwhelming and poorly thought-out, making career opportunities untenable for many (Alemu 2016: 22).

Another concern is an increase in the uptake and openness around recreational drug use. The end of the conflict in 2002 noted an increase in the presence and distribution of drugs, and over the last twenty years drugs such as a *djamba*, a similar drug to marijuana,

have become increasingly accessible and openly used (Bøäs and Hatløy 2005: 51). There is growing concern around the increased availability of opioid-based drugs such as Tramadol. In 2017 Sierra Leone was identified as one of eight countries being major transit-hubs and also distribution locations for various opioid-based drugs (WHO 2018: 44). The increased use and openness around drug-taking by youths frustrated by a worsening economic outlook has resulted in the return of community fears of the 'idle' and 'lumpen' youth. During an interview, Tennah (pseudonym) directly attributed the re-emergence of anti-social and volatile tendencies to a lack of government and international investment in male youth.

> So you see the idle ones [...] they'll be sitting there no work, nothing, many times because of their mind and complacency [...] other times because there is nobody to pay for them [...] it leads them to cause other types of trouble around (Tennah 2019).

With the continued stagnation of the formal economy and educational provisions youths still suffer, however their level of resilience has persisted. Not only was this observed during my time in Sierra Leone, it was also noted by Lucy (pseudonym) who has lived there since 2000.

> It didn't enter their heads to be angry with the government for not investing in them, for not providing for them. It was just the most sort of extraordinary thing really (Lucy 2019).

Still there is the question of what happens when the youths reach breaking point. Since 2020 there have been an increasing number of violent outburst and riots. In 2020, Makeni-based youths clashed with the police over the relocation of a generator to Lunsar in Port Loko district (Consortium for Good Governance, 2020). This interaction denotes a level of distrust between the youth and the government. Then in early 2021 footage emerged of rioting in Freetown. Later it was explained that the rioting resulted from growing distrust in the security sector and from economic tensions (Thomas 2021). There is room for speculatory analysis of the dynamic relationship between youth and the government, which is only compounded by the reality that a full report has yet to be published. Most recently, in August 2022 violent protests broke out between mostly youth protesters and the security forces. The rioting, which lasted several days, leaving several protesters and security personnel dead, was in direct response to the increased cost of living and the worsening socio-economic situation for youth (Fofana and Inveen 2022). This was in addition to growing anger regarding increases in police and security sector violence against the population (Thomas 2022). Of note was that protesters directly called for the removal of President Maada Bio,

indicating a disconnect between the government and the needs and expectations of youth.

Conclusion

Youth involvement in the conflict is a clear example of how the perpetuation of social injustices directly threatens security and stability within a state. In this case, disenfranchisement through exclusion from education and employment opportunities demonstrates how opposition to social injustices can materialise into a security risk threatening peace and state destabilisation. Moreover, youth participation in the conflict will have significant and long-lasting ramifications on community relations and social cohesion.

Despite some efforts to address the causes of the crisis of youth during the post-conflict peacebuilding period, education and income generation continue to be contentious issues. Whilst the government continues to promote policies to remove educational barriers, it remains unclear as to how effective such efforts have been considering the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in widespread school closures during much of the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 scholastic years. In relation to avenues of income generation, the youth population continues to be plagued by high rates of unemployment and underemployment, resulting in many turning to the informal economy in favours of small-scale commodity trade and the *okada* industry. The *okada* industry provides considerable informal income generation opportunities and a wider community service. Nevertheless, the industry, as with all industries situated within the informal economy, remains unpredictable and without the financial safety nets provided in the formal economy. Moreover, with an increase in fuel prices, many *okada* riders report increased financial pressures and strain.

When considering the perception of youth within society, this too remains complex and contentious. The negative perceptions of the 'idle' youth still resonate within contemporary Sierra Leonean society, particularly among those who experienced the conflict first-hand. While there are those who question whether the 'idle' and 'lumpen' youth ever existed, those within the community acknowledge how the persistent lack of opportunities allows for anti-social tendencies to resurface. Peace within the country remains fragile and the ongoing experience of youth-related social injustice still has the capacity to disrupt country-wide stability. Moreover, socio-economic pressures will continue to grow as the full impact of COVID-19 becomes more apparent. Given the links between socio-economic injustices and security threats, it is vital to continue to monitor the situation for the youth in Sierra Leone and, to the extent feasible within the weak Sierra Leonian economy with a Gross National Income of just US$490 per head, to provide sustainable avenues to education and gainful employment for those who currently have so little hope for the future.

Interviews
Names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

George 2019 interviewed in Freetown, on 30/01/2019.

Georgieta 2019 interviewed in Makeni, on 17/01/2019.

Lucy 2019 interviewed in Freetown, on 11/01/2019.

Tennah 2019 interviewed in Makeni, on 18/01/2019.

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End Note

1. Fieldwork in Sierra Leone was conducted from late 2018 until early 2019 as a part of my PhD research. The purpose of the fieldwork was to examine the long-term impact of transitional justice and societal perceptions of how effective the process was in consolidating peace. Interviews were conducted with members of NGOs, CSOs located in the north and west of the country and covered a variety of topics associated with lived-experiences during the conflict, transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction and socio-economic development. All interviews present in this article were conducted in English while in Sierra Leone.

Author

Having recently been awarded her doctorate, Christina Mammone's research examines the limitations of international humanitarian efforts in promoting sustainable long-term peacebuilding. Her research is primarily focused on transitional justice and how its relationship with development can provide a more durable form of peace. To address this relationship, Christina's approach to transitional justice research incorporates retrospective analysis and contemporary development perspectives.