Youth and war in Sierra Leone

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Introduction

The inclusion of child combatants in a growing number of peace agreements in Africa reflects both the extent of the pernicious use of children in armed conflict and the result of pressure from advocacy groups to ensure that states uphold their responsibility under Article 39 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child to promote the physical and psychological recovery from violence, including armed conflict.

The form that this inclusion most commonly takes is as a sub-group within Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes. I will argue in this article that such an approach serves to conflate the varied experiences of young people actively involved in armed conflict as well as failing to address the economic, political and social participation needs of all young people. The marginalisation of youth was a key factor in the causes and modality of the civil war in Sierra Leone. The neglect of youth is short-sighted and counter-productive in peace building; a peace agreement’s endurance depends on whether the next generation accepts or rejects it, how they are socialised during the peace process, and their perceptions of what that peace has achieved.

This article examines some of the different contexts and identities as well as the commonalities of young people’s involvement in armed conflict in Sierra Leone that need to be considered in post-war reconciliation and reconstruction. As with the general population, youth make different choices about their modes of engagement with society, including whether they engage at all. Even in the most extreme cases of conflict some choose to go into hiding or exile, while others, under a variety of pressures, join roaming militias. In the post-war period different needs apply to those who were forcibly recruited and those who volunteered; those who fought with the support of, and in defence of, their communities, and those who were part of forces that terrorised civilians; those who are demobilised to their home communities and those in refugee camps; and there are differences between the needs of girls and boys.

Part 1 traces the deepening political and economic marginalisation of young people in Sierra Leone during the 1970s and 1980s. Part 2 examines the varying
involvement of children in the warring groups. The war began in 1991 with no more than 400 insurgents ranged against total government forces of 2,500. Prior to demobilisation, estimates of total numbers of combatants varied between 50,000 and 70,000. Perhaps half of all combatants in the RUF/SL were in the age range 8–14 years old. Significant numbers of under-18 combatants were also in irregular army units and the Civil Defence Forces.

The reasons why children are increasingly involved in armed conflict in Africa are discussed elsewhere (Maxted 2002). Youth stand in highly ambiguous positions between autonomous liberal subjects and over-determined victims. Many children were conscripted against their will in Sierra Leone, mainly by the RUF/SL, and in this respect a majority of participants can be considered as the result of manipulations of older people in power. But many under-age combatants joined up voluntarily, some looking for revenge, others stressing the loss of educational opportunity as a major factor in the decision to fight (Peters and Richards 1998). The young have rights under the Convention of the Rights of the Child that correspond to some of the fundamental bases of sustainable peace, namely the basic human needs provision of security, identity recognition and space for development. The challenge is how to award young people with special protection and extend their participation in the political and social reconstruction processes that shape their future.

1 State failure and the marginalisation of youth

In the years after independence in 1961 Sierra Leone 'experienced a genuine multi-party political process that was open, representative and accountable,
with the state operating as the guardian of civil society’ (Abraham 2000: 13). Opposition parties operated freely, the judiciary was independent and local government structures were in place with chiefdom and district councils. The economy was growing at over 4 per cent per year, exports were rising and unemployment was low.

From the late 1960s, however, power was increasingly centralised by the leader of the All People’s Congress (APC), Siaka Stevens, who had come to power initially in the 1967 elections. The perceived northern-based opposition APC won a narrow and controversial victory – fully one half of the country opposed him – over the ruling Sierra Leone’s People’s Party (SLPP), perceived as dominated by the largest ethnic group, Mende, from the south-east. In the process Stevens weakened the democratic nature of the state, limiting the autonomy of civil society. Paramount chiefs were co-opted or repressed and ceased to be representatives of their people. State intervention in elections at both the local and national level removed competitiveness and accountability by eliminating opposition.

This undermining of the electoral process was achieved by the use of politically motivated violence and intimidation against opposition and civil society groups, from the police, the army and increasingly by the use of unemployed youths from the urban and diamond-mining areas (Abdullah 1997). The two geographical areas that received the brunt of APC violence were the southern and eastern provinces (Lavalie 1985), particularly the diamond-rich Kono and Kenema Districts. In response the SLPP organised an anti-APC campaign based on the use of the Poro, a male secret society among the Tembe and Mende ethnic groups of south-eastern Sierra Leone and south-western Liberia. The resistance of the people of the southern and eastern provinces to acts of APC violence led the government to invoke the Public Order Act of 1965 (Davies 2000).

The judiciary was reorganised and the Privy Council removed as the highest court, and a one-party state was established in 1978. The centralisation of power saw the abolition of local government in 1971, undermining the bases of local revenue. Opportunity became increasingly limited to party functionaries and their clients, opening the door for widespread corruption. Illicit diamond mining exploded after Stevens’s election following election promises that mining would be free for all. This was in spite of the fact that as pre-independence minister of mines in the 1950s Stevens had argued for the corporate exploitation of diamonds under the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST) (Davies 2000: 3). Stevens tolerated massive theft of diamonds belonging to the state-owned national Diamond Mining Company created in 1971 to take over from the SLST. Consequently Sierra Leone official diamond exports plummeted from 2 million carats in 1970 to less than 200,000 in 1984.

Rural Sierra Leone was home to 80 per cent of the population and the source of much of the country’s wealth. Subsidies on food had long benefited the urban population, while food exports were under-priced. Rural areas were extremely deprived of basic services and infrastructure, such as electricity, pipe-borne
water, telecommunications and transportation networks. The railway linking the rural areas to Freetown was dismantled in the early 1970s while no road network replaced it in rural areas. Socio-economic indicators provide further evidence of rural isolation. In 1990 access to safe water and sanitation was 83 per cent and 59 per cent for urban areas respectively, compared to 22 per cent and 35 per cent for rural areas. Sierra Leone ranked last on the global index of human development. Life expectancy at birth was only 42 years, inflation was running at 11 per cent, and per capita income was just the equivalent of US$250 a year.

Illiteracy rates were very high in the absence of a free primary education system. Rural isolation and underdevelopment induced large-scale rural to urban migration, swelling the numbers of urban unemployed.

The conjunction of corruption, diminution of formal diamond mining and declining terms of trade in the 1970s led to a fall in GDP growth from 4 per cent in the 1960s to 1.9 per cent in the 1970s and to 0.5 per cent in the 1980s. Unable to raise enough revenue to provide services, the country witnessed endless rice and fuel shortages, electricity blackouts, water shortages, rising unemployment and poverty, soaring costs of living and high inflation. A structural adjustment programme launched in 1989 resulted in the removal of subsidies on basic commodities and large-scale public sector retrenchment.

The downward economic trend in the 1970s and the rampant corruption and mismanagement of the 1980s created an enormous economic strait-jacket that made it impossible for the state to function as a state. In this constricting situation the social and educational programmes suffered and students’ subventions were cut, while employment in both public and private sectors was cut (Abdullah 2000: 105). A major consequence of shrinking state revenues was drastic cutbacks in education and social welfare. Throughout the 1980s there was less money for leisure or recreational facilities in schools and colleges, and by 1991 sports events between schools ceased to take place.

An elitist educational system failed to cater for non-academic technical and vocational abilities, leading to large-scale drop-out, and the prevailing lack of rural opportunities induced high rates of rural to urban migration. A higher education system that had been designed by the colonial power to produce the elite managers of society was in crisis (Rashid 2000: 111). In addition to the decline in resources for students the patrimonial system blocked opportunities for all but a handful of party faithful. The blocked aspirations and physical deprivations of the students coalesced with the frustration of the unemployed urban youth. By the late 1980s infrastructure and basic utilities like electricity and water supply had virtually collapsed, even in Freetown the national capital. Much of the economy went underground with buoyant black markets for scarce basic commodities.

Under Stevens’s successor, Major-General Joseph Momoh, the government assumed, under a state of economic emergency in 1987, wide powers to crack down on corruption, gold and diamond smuggling, hoarding of essential commodities and local currency reserves. A series of strikes by lawyers, students, children and the unemployed took place, and following their expulsion
from the Fourah Bay College campus of the University of Sierra Leone, the seedbed for anti-APC agitation, a group of students recruited volunteers from the growing army of potential rebels – students, the young urban unemployed – for military training in Libya to overthrow the APC as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)/Sierra Leone. Many students, however, later abandoned the cause, permitting the leadership of Foday Sankoh, a former army corporal once jailed by the APC for taking part in a coup attempt. Subsequently Sankoh eliminated the remaining intellectuals who threatened his leadership (Abdullah 1997).

2 Child combatants and the civil war

The RUF launched the rebellion in 1991, with support from Liberian and Burkinabe fighters on loan from Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia, attacking the town of Bomaru bordering Liberia on the east, a remote rural area alienated from the regime in power. In spite of Taylor’s threat that Sierra Leone would taste the bitterness of war, an extremely complacent Major-General Joseph Momoh, unlike Stevens, neglected state security even after loaning bases to the West African intervention force, ECOMOG, fighting Charles Taylor’s rebels in neighbouring Liberia (Richards 1996, Gberie 1999, both quoted in Abraham 2000).

Sankoh claimed he started this ‘people’s war’ in order to liberate the masses from the corruption and oppression of the APC government, which indeed had ruled Sierra Leone corruptly for twenty years (Muana 1997, Abraham 1997, both quoted in Abraham 2000). There was no social or political agenda and the RUF lacked the organisational and ideological characteristics and discipline of a

Figure 2. Lieutenant Amra Foforna (RUF), Koidu, Sierra Leone.
revolutionary movement. The RUF did not attack the APC as an organisation or a government, or even military installations, but chiefs, traditional office holders, local traders, prosperous farmers, even Imams, who were subject to public beheadings, open floggings, rape, forced labour and other form of humiliation (Abraham 2000: 16).

By early 1992 10,000 people had been killed, 300,000 displaced, 200,000 of whom were in refugee camps in Guinea, with in total some 400,000 people behind rebel lines. This ideological barrenness and the low social standing of the rebels, who were primarily drawn from unemployed urban youth or those who dregged for diamonds in alluvial mining pits for Lebanese and Sierra Leonean merchants in the east and the towns, explains why with the onset of war the RUF inflicted terror and unspeakable atrocities against civilians, in order to conscript mainly children and enforce bonding and acceptance. In addition the RUF/SL abducted and trained large numbers of youths captured in the border zones. Abductees co-operated with the movement to save their lives but some found the movement’s analysis of the breakdown of Sierra Leonean society meaningful and accepted guerrilla training willingly (Peters and Richards 1998).

Opposed to the RUF was an ill-equipped government army, the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (RSLMF). Despite the inexperienced junior officers quickly learning to copy the RUF/SL’s guerrilla tactics, including recruitment and training of under-age irregulars, the RSLMF faced humiliation on the war front. On 30 April 1992 Captain Valentine Strasser announced the overthrow of Momoh’s APC government. Believing that it had radicalised the young officers, the RUF expected to be invited to share in some kind of government of national unity. Civilian elements persuaded Strasser not to negotiate with the RUF and instead rearmed and transformed the army. From a force of some 2,500 at the beginning of the war under the NPRC the army was increased to 15,000 hastily trained recruits drawn from the same unemployed youth as the RUF.

The NPRC quickly lost control of its enlarged but poorly trained army. Pay was low and sometimes never reached units at the war front (Peters and Richards 1998). Soldiers and NPRC officials engaged in mining of alluvial diamonds in the war zone. Some officers sold weapons to the RUF for diamonds while others faked rebel attacks in order to loot civilians. In waves of misinformation each side blamed the other for the carnage and brutalisation which came to characterise the war. Over 70 per cent of the population became homeless or refugees. Girls as young as 10 were made sex slaves, and boys were drugged and conscripted as soldiers and made to complete their initiation, or ‘deinstitutionalisation’ as it was called, by committing their first atrocities against members of their own families.

With little faith in the ability of the NPRC to defend them, civil defence groups began to be mobilised in the rural areas to protect themselves against both RUF pockets and army renegades, the ‘sobels’. In the south and east these groups were called kamajo (pl. kamajoa), in the north, tamaboro. It was largely these Civil Defence Forces, with their superior local knowledge and tracking and ambush skills, who prevented the RUF from seizing the whole
country. A significant number – approximately 4,000 – of these fighters were young people under 18. An interview with a young kamajo militia fighter by Peters and Richards (1998) reveals the grass-roots origin of the militia before they were turned into a semi-official ‘ethnic’ militia by the Kabbah government in 1996. He tells how he took up combat when he was 16 because his schooling had been halted by RUF attacks on Kono. Driven into Guinea as a refugee by the fighting, he returned to his village to ‘represent’ his father – owner of a hunting gun – in the kamajo militia at the orders of his local chief and take part in combat operations against the RUF/SL.

The lucrative diamond mines in the east remained, however, firmly in the grip of the RUF. And the war itself is considered to be more about diamonds and the control of territory than political power – a reason why many foreign interests have been drawn into the fray. The RUF waged a brutal war without ever administering a key territory or mobilising popular support. They existed because they were armed. Once disarmed, as the 2002 elections showed, there was no discernible RUF constituency.

After six military coups and three abortive attempts to return to civilian rule, multi-party elections took place in 1996, resulting in Ahmad Tejan Kabbah becoming president. In a peace agreement in 1996 the RUF was granted amnesty and allowed to reorganise as a political party. Sankoh reneged on this and instructed his men to launch further attacks. As the marriage between the RUF and the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces became an open secret the Kabbah government decided to restructure the army and remove disloyal
elements. However, a year later Kabbah was ousted by a coalition of army officers and rebels of the Revolutionary United Front.

The coupists released Johnny Paul Koroma, a veteran sobel, from prison where he had been detained on charges of plotting a coup. He was named head of a junta-style Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) with Sankoh as his deputy, even though he was still in prison in Nigeria, having been arrested for apparently illegally carrying weapons. The army and the RUF were declared a United People’s Army.

For the next ten months Sierra Leone became the scene of a reign of terror that drew condemnation from the whole world. Several efforts were made to restore constitutional order but the junta reneged and tried to extend its stay in power. ECOMOG troops, provoked by the AFRC/RUF, launched an offensive that dislodged the junta and restored the democratically elected Kabbah in 1998. The AFRC/RUF regrouped under the protection of Charles Taylor and plotted arguably the most merciless offensive of the entire war.

This was an assault – ‘Operation No Living Thing’ – on Freetown in January 1999, planned, organised and financed by an international cartel of criminal gangsters hoping to gain free rein over Sierra Leone’s diamonds and other resources. The force included Liberians, Ukrainians, Italians, Burkinabe, South Africans, Taiwanese and Israelis. The east and the centre of the city were taken and in ten days 6,300 were murdered, 3,000 children abducted and one-third of the population left homeless. The pattern of human rights abuses was described as one of extraordinary cruelty; particularly appalling was the hacking off of ears, noses, hands, arms and legs of civilians including small children and the elderly (Reuters, 26 February 1999).

Figure 4. Soldier destroying his weapon as part of the disarmament process, Koidu, Sierra Leone.
A 1999 peace agreement with RUF leader Foday Sankoh collapsed in 2000. The resulting conflict saw the capture by rebels of UN and British military personnel. Sankoh himself was seized by government forces in Freetown. A UN operation succeeded in disarming 45,000 rebels by the beginning of 2002, paving the way for elections in May in which Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected as president.

Conclusion

A major contributing factor to the high participation rate of children in the civil war in Sierra Leone was the degradation of educational and employment opportunities due to economic mismanagement, political corruption and the effect of structural adjustment policies. Despite this shared socio-economic status the experiences of child combatants diverged according to a number of factors, including whether they had volunteered or been forcibly recruited, and whether they had the support of their communities. To a large extent such support would depend upon whether they had been involved in the attack and terrorisation of the civilian population, or participated in the defence of their local communities. This diversity necessitates a conflict-specific approach to the study of youth in the post-war situation. Nevertheless this article concurs with Abdullah’s (2000: 105) observation that ‘a project that addresses the needs of youth in general with built-in sensitivity to the different categories of youth is more likely to succeed than one that is designed for a particular group of

Figure 5. School room, Sierra Leone.
ex-combatants'. A focus on training and education is essential, along with trauma and healing facilities, recreation provision and the broader assurance of physical security. Young people also desire and have rights under the Convention of the Rights of the Child to meaningful forms of political participation and agency. War-affected children should be involved in the peace processes and in developing policy and programming for their own rehabilitation, reintegration and education, as well as in the development of their communities.

References