

# I. INTRODUCTION

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Young people in Sierra Leone are standing on a divide, with one foot still planted in the mire of a bloody decade-long war from which they are just emerging, and the other slowly edging its way toward the more secure ground of a newly established peace. They hesitate, contemplating the move, unconvinced that what lies ahead is better than where they have been. Memories of the brutal war that began in 1991, in which they played a major part, make them wary of promises of safe, solid ground ahead. Their experience of adult manipulation and betrayal make them distrustful. Moreover, the choice of committing to peace is not theirs alone. It is also up to the adults on whom the young people of Sierra Leone depend — government, communities, families and international agencies — to make sure that peace for young people means more than the end of armed conflict.

Following Sierra Leone's independence from British colonial rule in 1961, politicians preached well-being for all, but the country remained one of the world's poorest, and few young people could find ways to create change. For decades, all young people hoped for was the fulfillment of their basic rights - a chance to go to school, to get health care, to find jobs, to participate in the life of their communities, to be respected and listened to by politicians and to live without insecurity. But the political system was undemocratic, and resources and power remained in the hands of a few. They saw the children of government officials attending expensive private schools while most of them lived with few comforts and could not afford to go to school at all.

In the 1970s, students rode a wave of change that was sweeping across parts of Africa, in part inspired by the writings of Moammar Gadhafi, and protested Sierra Leone's dictatorial and repressive one-party system under the All People's Congress political party. They called for reforms that would lead to better education for young people and a better standard of living for all. They believed that Sierra Leone, rich with natural resources - diamonds, bauxite, titanium - and plush with beautiful coastal waters and verdant, fertile countryside - could and should provide for everyone. But their modest hopes and dreams exploded into years of brutal civil war.

In 1991, some of the former student protesters who had survived violent government retaliation abandoned the course of non-violent change and began a military revolt against the Sierra Leone government. They gained tactical and financial strength from young fighters involved in civil war in neighboring Liberia, who were part of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia rebel group and used Sierra Leone's riches to support their war. Led by Foday Sankoh, they became the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF), inducing a new generation of disillusioned young people who had no food, no prospects and few alternatives, to join a "Movement" against the government.

But the changes young people hoped for were quickly lost amid a protracted and bloody war. Youthful impetuosity and few support structures made for easy manipulation of young people by adults on all sides advancing their own personal and political ambitions. They turned young people's own words and dreams against them, and Sierra Leone was destroyed at the hands of adolescents and youth.

Both the RUF and the local pro-government Civil Defense Forces (CDFs) were sustained by the thousands of new, malleable young recruits whom they attracted with their rhetoric or captured by force and successfully indoctrinated. Boys and girls were taken from their families, trained and turned into fighters, sexual slaves, cooks and porters. Undergoing training rituals that made them believe they were invincible, these young recruits became instruments of terror that spread across Sierra Leone. On both sides, they killed, maimed and abducted, committing gross atrocities. Girls were brutally raped, sexually mutilated and enslaved by the RUF. Hundreds of thousands of young people ran from their homes, but they found little safety as refugees and internally displaced persons.

At the same time, despite their bravado and the wholesale destruction of the country, young people had not let go of their original dreams of security, education, work and a meaningful life. They wanted an end to the war and to believe that they had fought or survived for something. After several failed attempts at peace, the Lomé Peace Agreement was signed in 1999, and today, in 2002, a reasonable level of security has come to their communities. Some government and international programs have begun to help with reconstruction, reconciliation and support for young people. But these programs are far too few and limited.

In the northern town of Makeni, the former headquarters of the RUF, hundreds of young ex-RUF fighters are left without the riches promised by their commanders; they have little access to education, no jobs and nowhere else to go. Sexual violence endured by girls during the conflict has proliferated into widespread sexual exploitation — engendered by peacetime poverty and post-conflict despair.

Under pressure to forgive and move on, young people remain hesitant; in many cases their anger and resentment are growing. They are not being heard, and their rights are not being observed by politicians. Education and health care are as elusive as they were a generation ago. Young Sierra Leoneans see a peace that has not brought well-being to society, but has further enriched those who plundered its resources.

Yet, despite their exhaustion, mistrust and disappointment, young people desperately want to take the step toward a sustainable peace. They know they are the most precious resources Sierra Leone has today - more precious than the diamonds for which so many people were killed. The war could not have been fought without them; likewise, the peace cannot be made without them.

## PARTICIPATORY STUDY WITH ADOLESCENTS IN SIERRA LEONE

From April to July 2002, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (Women's Commission) conducted a research study on the situation of adolescents and youth in the western and northern regions of Sierra Leone — mainly in and surrounding Freetown and Makeni. The principal researchers and respondents were Sierra Leonean adolescents and youth. The results of this collaborative work are presented here. While this report faithfully represents the findings of all of the researchers, unless otherwise attributed, the views expressed here should be considered those of the Women's Commission. Additional reports of the research findings produced solely by the adolescent researchers are available from the Women's Commission.

This research project is the third in a series of four participatory studies with adolescents conducted by the Women's Commission. The first was in Kosovo, the second in northern Uganda, and the fourth will be in Asia, focused on Burmese refugees. The studies provide an in-depth look at the experiences of adolescents affected by war and persecution and the

international and local responses to their situation. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR's) *Guidelines for the Protection and Care of Refugee Children* and its *Guidelines on the Prevention of Sexual Violence*, the United Nations *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are used as guiding principles in this work. Reports and recommendations from these studies will be shared with program and policy decision-makers to address concerns raised in each site covered. They will also contribute to wider international efforts to improve services and protection for refugee, internally displaced, returnee and other adolescents affected by armed conflict and persecution.

This study in Sierra Leone builds on the ongoing advocacy work of the Women's Commission with and for adolescents in the region. In 1997, the Women's Commission produced a report, *The Children's War: Toward Peace in Sierra Leone*, identifying devastating human rights abuses against children and adolescents and the abduction of and violence against girls. In 1999, the Women's Commission conducted a capacity-building project linking local women's groups with international humanitarian agencies. Binta Mansaray, a field-based protection partner for the Women's Commission in Sierra Leone, who provides on-the-ground monitoring, advocacy and technical advice to key policymakers and assistance providers, has advanced this work in the past year. To date, her work has focused mainly on identifying gaps and proposing remedies concerning the sexual exploitation of girls, the rehabilitation of former combatants and others similarly "separated" during the conflict — particularly girls — and the protection and promotion of the rights of internally displaced and returned refugee women and children.

A delegation from the Leadership Council for Children and Armed Conflict, a joint initiative of the Women's Commission and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), visited Sierra Leone's eastern and western regions to support the needs and rights of war-affected children in April 2002. This work has been followed by advocacy efforts to increase targeted assistance for young people in Sierra Leone. The Women's Commission is also a member of the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium, which, through its partners, is working in Sierra Leone to improve and promote comprehensive reproductive health care through the provision of

direct services and advocacy activities.

The western and northern regions of Sierra Leone are the focus of this study, and while many of the findings are universal to all young people in Sierra Leone, further research and distinct responses to adolescent and youth concerns in the eastern and southern regions are urgently needed. Violence in West Africa has not abated, and interventions to address and prevent war in Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and throughout the region are imperative.

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*Wan Salone!* — One Sierra Leone! This is the message that many young people in Sierra Leone are sending to their communities and the world today. Over 600 adolescents and youth interviewed in the western and northern regions of Sierra Leone in April and May 2002 describe a long history of manipulation and abuse of young people in Sierra Leone that has fractured and divided them. To achieve lasting peace, they insist that history must not be repeated. To eliminate instability and degradation in their communities and everyday lives, young people themselves must put aside their differences and unite in a common cause to rebuild their broken lives and a broken Sierra Leone.

These young people see the decade-long war in Sierra Leone as fundamentally about adolescents and youth — their issues and their involvement. Rebel groups, which some young people joined as a last resort in their struggle to change the political system, perverted the cause of non-violent student activists, who had championed reform, dragging young people into the conflict and compelling them to commit atrocities against each other and their communities. Young people on both sides of the conflict became perpetrators and victims of the war, while the spoils of war, diamonds especially, remained controlled by adults who had no intention of fulfilling young people's rights.

Three years since the signing of the Lomé Peace Agreement in 1999, young people say they remain traumatized by their war experiences. They are angered and desperately frustrated that relief and rehabilitation efforts have not substantially improved their lives. This frustration has exacerbated the divisions among them and aggravated competition for scarce resources and attention to their suffering, fur-

ther hindering their own recovery and ability to forgive one another.

International institutions chronologically define children as human beings under 18 years of age, adolescents as between 10 and 19, youth as 15 to 24 and young people as 10 to 24.<sup>1</sup> While terms used in this report do reflect these definitions, concepts regarding the developmental stages of life are socially and culturally bound and are further explored in the Sierra Leone context in this report. The names of adolescents and youth used in this report have been changed for their protection and privacy.

ther hindering their own recovery and ability to forgive one another.

While young people feel divided by their experiences in war and increasingly by those in peace, the concerns they share are strikingly the same. Regardless of age, gender, location and experiences with fighting forces, young people are concerned about a lack of educational opportunities, poverty, a lack of health care, employment and other basic necessities. These are the same issues young activists had spoken about generations before and that youth organizations speak out about today. Young people also feel victimized and marginalized by adults, repeatedly indicting the government of Sierra Leone in particular for dismissing their concerns and neglecting their capacities.

Young people call on the international community — especially the government of Sierra Leone and United Nations agencies — nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their communities to place young people's concerns and their capacities at the center of recovery efforts. Recognizing that they were at the center of the war, they believe they must be at the center of peacemaking and reconstruction. Without better support and respect for their rights, young people will become more angry and disaffected, and are likely to become a major source of new unrest.

## FINDINGS

With overwhelming consistency, adolescents and youth cite lack of educational opportunities, poverty and lack of health care as their top concerns. These are followed closely by lack of shelter/food/water/

clothing, unemployment, and lack of parental/family/home care. This grouping of concerns paints a picture of young people's conception of their lives as bereft of basic care and bereft of the basic means to care for themselves.

Young people issue a common call for the equitable sharing of Sierra Leone's resources. They also underline the importance of education as a key solution for young people, providing them with a sense of hope and purpose and concrete skills to earn a livelihood.

## EDUCATION

Adolescents say that lack of educational opportunities is their number one problem and name formal schooling and skills training as the main solution. Without education, many feel hopeless and at times turn to more destructive behaviors.

Young people believe that full reconstruction of the education system, largely destroyed during the war, is critical to building peace in Sierra Leone. They report that many schools are barely functioning, particularly in rural areas, with few scholastic materials, little classroom furniture and inadequately trained teachers. They also say that even if primary education is free, costs, such as for uniforms and school supplies, remain out of their reach. Access to secondary education is, for many, even more unattainable, as there are fewer schools and costs are higher. Fewer girls attend school than boys, whose education is prioritized when family resources are limited.

Adolescents are also concerned about livelihood education in the form of skills training or apprenticeships. Education programs, they say, are an important component of reintegration for former adolescent soldiers, but must be attached to job opportunities in the future. Young people are calling on decision-makers to make education accessible to all and to continue and expand programs that help former combatants enter formal and vocational education and that offer rapid education catch-up classes for the years missed.

## LIVELIHOOD

Poverty and unemployment are among young people's top concerns. The few skills training programs available are under-resourced and ill equipped. Sierra Leone's economy is so poor, young people have difficulty using the skills they learn. Hoping to find better economic opportunities, they are flocking to

already-overcrowded urban areas, and some communities are glutted with young people trained in the same skill. Unable to earn a living, many girls are turning to commercial sex work, and some boys are turning to crime. Others try their luck prospecting in diamond mines, away from family and in easy reach of former rebel commanders. Idle and frustrated young people, overall, may easily become fodder for continued instability.

Eighty-five percent of Sierra Leone's economy is agricultural, and former refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are going home to farms that have not been worked in years, lacking implements and skilled farmers. Many adolescents never learned to farm, are uninterested in farming and are seeking skills they consider to be more exciting. To be revived, this much-needed industry must be made more attractive for young people.

Young people say that they need micro-credit, income-generating support and start-up capital to put their skills to use. They maintain that decision-makers must begin to make more strategic choices about involving them directly in reconstruction and development efforts. This would include skills assessment and training programs directly linked to their involvement in rebuilding. The community would both get the skills it needs from young people and have a larger stake in recovery efforts, now directed and implemented by outsiders.

## HEALTH

Adolescents are acutely concerned about their health. The war has ravaged health and other infrastructures, and Sierra Leone stands among the lowest of all countries for many human development indicators. Young people were directly targeted in the conflict, and those who survived continue to struggle with war wounds, including amputations. Adolescents also report a lack of fresh, clean water and poor sanitation in camps and rural areas. They express strong concerns about a variety of diseases spread under these conditions, including malaria, diarrhea, tuberculosis and other respiratory infections.

Access to reproductive health care is a critical problem for adolescents. Compounding the problem, young people reveal extremely little knowledge about basic health issues, including prevention of HIV/AIDS. Most disturbingly, adolescents stated repeatedly their disbelief in the existence of many

diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. Girls, especially, continue to experience sexual violence and exploitation and are forced into early marriages. They are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, and of unwanted and dangerous pregnancies. Girls also have higher estimated infection rates than boys. They have experienced more sexual violence and exploitation than boys and are less likely to be in school where health information might be conveyed.

Adolescents rarely visit health clinics and hospitals, reporting that they are either non-existent or too costly; many young people normally see traditional healers, often ingesting toxic herbs that make them sicker. Health care providers need to offer young people better information about and access to free or very low cost health care. They must also find ways to make services easier to use, for example, by ensuring confidentiality.

## PROTECTION

### *Gender-based Violence*

A sexual violence and exploitation scandal involving refugee and internally displaced children and adolescents in West Africa, in which aid workers and UN peacekeepers were implicated, sparked long-needed international attention to the issue. Women's Commission and adolescent research confirm that sexual exploitation is widespread, affecting young people beyond those who are IDPs and former refugees. Young people identify poverty, feelings of worthlessness and pressure from parents as key inducements into prostitution, as well as the large presence of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) soldiers, whom they name as principal customers, along with other adult males and male youth. Although mainly girls are affected, boys are involved in smaller numbers; their numbers are less known because discussion of male victimization is more taboo than that of girls.

Numerous other forms of gender-based violence are also taking place according to the young people. Many girls describe ongoing trauma and health problems resulting from rape and sexual enslavement suffered during the conflict. Girls also voice concerns about being forced into marriages or marrying younger than they would like to due mainly to economic pressures. They also voiced strong concerns about forced initiation into traditional secret societies for women, where female genital mutilation

is performed on young girls. New international initiatives to address gender-based violence are underway, but the implementation and monitoring of outcomes, as well as the involvement of young people and communities in prevention and care for survivors are critical to their success.

### *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program*

Young people say enormous gaps in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program have left many who were involved with fighting forces without support and have contributed to additional child protection problems. Many girls who were formerly with fighting forces feel that the DDR did not adequately address their concerns and instead focused on boys who were directly involved in fighting.

Those formerly with the rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) (see Glossary), are especially angry about the situation and threaten a return to fighting. As promises of reintegration services are not met, they say they feel lied to and desperate for support. Those between 18 and 25 years old are particularly marginalized, without help reunifying with family and returning home. Some young people remain with their former commanders and "bush husbands," still afraid to leave; others have turned to commercial sex work and/or are living on the streets, involved in crime and drug use.

### *Refugee and IDP Returns*

Returning refugees and IDPs suffer from gaps in the coordination of humanitarian aid. Some families are becoming separated: elderly members may be unable to make the journey back, and young people may remain behind in order to attend school. Refugees and IDPs return to communities with little infrastructure, few services in place and minimal reintegration support to help them rebuild their lives. Refugees and IDPs also need support negotiating with former rebel fighters, who are occupying the houses of the formerly displaced as the rebels themselves often have little ability to pay rent or return home.

### *Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Mechanisms*

Young people register knowledge about and interest in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the general amnesty granted combatants in the war and the Special Court for trying crimes committed in the war. But they are confused about how these

mechanisms will bring justice, forgiveness and healing to Sierra Leone. They want to know how participating in the TRC will improve their lives, and former RUF child combatants are against children being tried before the Special Court. Overall, young people are willing to forgive what happened in the war if the lives of *all* children, adolescents and youth are improved through comprehensive education, livelihood and health support.

### **Child Protection Efforts**

While a Child Protection Network led by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA) addresses many key child protection concerns, researchers found that child protection efforts more broadly are fragmented and need to be streamlined. Many entities have responsibility for different aspects of child protection, but these activities require increased coordination to create a more holistic approach to fulfilling the rights of all young people. Communities are currently confused by a variety of packages of support available to certain categories of vulnerable people, creating competition among them and confusion as to where to turn for aid.

### **PSYCHOSOCIAL**

The war's end declared no victors and no vanquished. Yet many young people describe themselves as the losers. Many express feelings of competition over scarce resources and argue about who has suffered most. Despite these feelings of division, young people reveal many shared concerns.

Virtually all young people surveyed share a sense of victimization and marginalization. They express a deep mistrust of adults, especially in government, and believe they have been used and manipulated in the conflict and continue to be used in politics. Despite the fact that they have spoken out strongly as combatants and as youth activists, they believe their concerns are not being heard and that they have no voice in making decisions that affect them.

Case studies and interviews also reveal an overwhelming preoccupation with wartime experiences and an urgent need to reconcile these experiences along the journey to forgiveness and healing. Young people employ a range of coping strategies to endure their circumstances — seeking control and sustenance in their lives through commercial sex work, asserting their strength through criminal activity, escaping their circumstances with drug use. Many

more psychosocial programs are needed, including those that support changes in community attitudes to support young people's recovery, particularly those surviving sexual violence.

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*Young people maintain that people in positions of power often indoctrinate adolescents to achieve their own "selfish" desires, and then "dump them at the end of the day without being given any responsible roles to play."*

— Makeni research team report, Sierra Leone, 2002

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### **PARTICIPATION — YOUNG PEOPLE'S CAPACITIES MUST BE SUPPORTED**

The research conducted by the adolescents confirms the abilities of young people to work successfully in partnership with adults. The participation of young people in activities that affect them must go beyond consultation to support their leadership and ideas.

Adolescents and youth consistently report an enormous feeling of exclusion from decision-making and lack of trust in adults acting on their behalf. The large number of youth-run organizations in Sierra Leone is testament, however, to the commitment and desire of young people to participate in shaping the recovery of their society. Young people participated in destroying Sierra Leone in the war; this is an urgent call to the adult world to engage young people in the constructive redevelopment of their communities in peacetime. Young people say this is best done through efforts that support and develop their capacities and that allow them to play a direct part in decision-making, project implementation and evaluation. Young people from all sides of the conflict — rebel and pro-government forces, civilians and youth activists — must work together to take action for a unified Sierra Leone.

### **COORDINATED, HOLISTIC RESPONSES NEEDED**

Young people's reality of marginalization is confirmed by a fragmented approach to support by government and international actors. Despite a prolifer-

ation of national and international initiatives which focus on young people, none offers a clear coordinated approach to support young people's rights in all reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts. For example, education planning is not directly linked to the identification of skills needed in infrastructure reconstruction activities.

"Child protection" initiatives addressing "vulnerable groups" find support relatively swiftly, while support to young people through broader reconstruction efforts is far less focused and lags behind. Limited attention to the status and concerns of young people in legislative initiatives as well is demonstrated by the long debate over a draft National Youth Policy and a slow-moving children's bill. Young people remain discouraged that neither Sierra Leone's laws and institutions, nor international and local agencies, are able to support their rights effectively and cohesively.

Sierra Leone's civil society youth organizations lack the support they need to provide leadership to fill the gap. Youth organizations representing groups outside main cities find it hard to become part of decision-making circles. Girls and young women are particularly underrepresented in youth organizations, with few females in positions of leadership. Some donors have initiated programs that attempt to increase the direct involvement of local youth from all sides of the conflict in programming to address their protection

and other problems holistically. But more efforts are needed.

Young people believe the road to a better, more peaceful life lies in their ability to find ways to cut through their differences and take action together. Achieving this will require identifying what kind of society they envision building, what rights they seek to uphold and what avenues they can utilize to attain their dreams. These avenues will involve partnerships with adults that replace manipulation and abuse with support for their unity and strength.

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*"It is clear that despite a tenuous peace, the so-called solutions to these problems are bound to explode if special consideration is not given to the welfare of adolescents and young people, a very crucial human resource. Sierra Leone stands central among countries whose socio-economic and political structures have been battered."*

— Freetown research team report, 2002

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## Key Recommendations

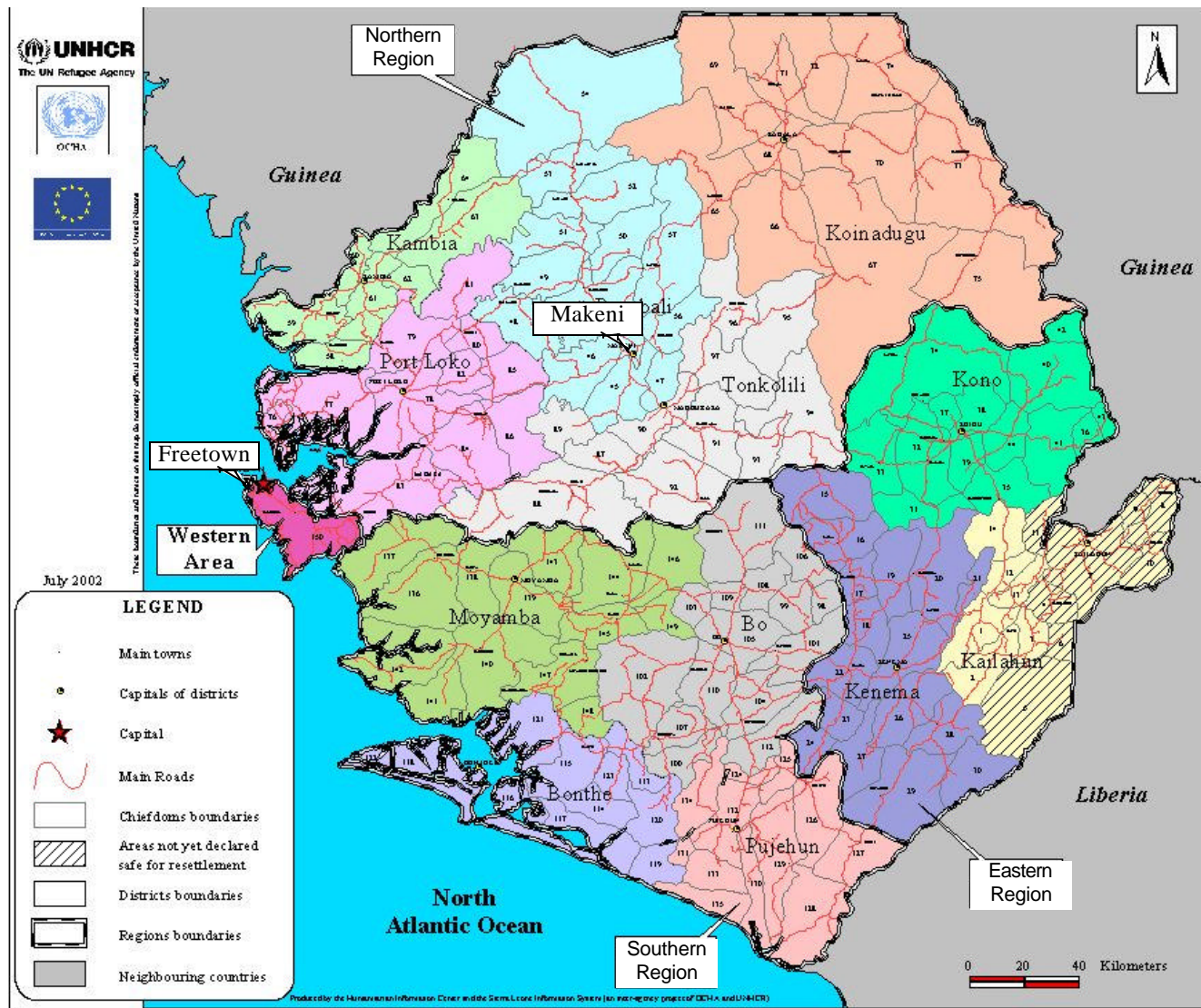
- **Full reintegration** — The International Community and the government of Sierra Leone must recognize adolescents and youth as Sierra Leone’s most precious resources, crucial to reconstruction and peace building. They must increase their support for the reintegration and recovery of all adolescents and youth, with targeted, holistic protection and assistance programs that address multiple needs and vulnerabilities, reduce competition among former child soldiers and other young people and support their capacities, including those of girls and women. These efforts must specifically address gaps in the formal DDR process and facilitate family reunifications.
- **National policies and legal frameworks** — The government of Sierra Leone must improve national policies and legal frameworks that protect children, adolescents and youth. Young people should be actively involved in decision-making, monitoring and enforcement of these tools for protection, which will help to decrease the marginalization that fueled the conflict. The government should pass the proposed National Youth Policy, enact a Child Rights law, eliminate gender discrimination under the law and streamline governmental and humanitarian approaches to child and adolescent protection and assistance. The National Commission for War-Affected Children should evolve into a focal point for advocacy, coordination and monitoring of all child-, adolescent- and youth-focused initiatives nationwide. Donors must support capacity building for government and civil society youth structures to ensure the success and sustainability of this work.
- **Education and livelihood** — The government of Sierra Leone and donors must respond to adolescents’ call for education as the linchpin of their recovery from war and must make the reconstruction of formal and non-formal education systems and the promotion of young people’s livelihood a priority. Adolescents must have access to both primary *and* secondary education, as well as vocational and other skills training, and equal access for girls must be assured. The government and key development organizations must immediately identify critical skills needed for the development and reconstruction of Sierra Leone, fund and link skills training for adolescents and youth to these activities and employ young people to undertake the needed tasks.
- **Gender equality and reproductive health** — The international community and the government of Sierra Leone must take strong steps to ensure the rights of girls, end gender-based violence and improve reproductive health care for adolescents. Steps taken by the UN Interagency Standing Committee to prevent the sexual violence and exploitation of children and adolescents must be implemented and enforced, and more services – especially health care, education, counseling and jobs – must be made available to survivors, mainly girls. Former girl soldiers passed over by the DDR should be identified and supported as part of holistic approaches to addressing girls’ protection and assistance. Adolescent-friendly reproductive health services should be made available throughout Sierra Leone and should include information about preventing unwanted pregnancy and STIs, including HIV/AIDS. Youth-led community-based advocacy initiatives that promote gender equality should be supported.

See also Recommendations section.



# III. MAP

## Sierra Leone



Sierra Leone is made up of four regions: three provinces (Eastern, Northern, Southern) and one area (Western) and has a system of local tribal councils. There are twelve districts<sup>2</sup> that are further divided into 150 chiefdoms.

# IV. ADOLESCENCE AND YOUTH: A COMMUNITY IN CRISIS

## DEFINING ADOLESCENCE IN SIERRA LEONE: TEENS OBSCURED BY FOCUS ON YOUTH

Adolescent and Women's Commission researchers asked young people and adults to discuss the question, "Who are adolescents in Sierra Leone today and what is their role in society?" Overall, they had little understanding about the meaning of adolescence, which is not generally a term or age group recognized in their society.



*Attention to the needs, rights and capacities of Sierra Leoneans between the ages of 10 and 19 has been eclipsed by a focus on younger children and older youth.*

Adolescence, or the population between the ages of 10 and 19, as defined by both UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO), is not a population that has received attention in Sierra Leonean society. Within a cohesive traditional society, there may be little need to adopt the largely western concept of "adolescence." However, the war in Sierra Leone, the ensuing social, economic and cultural upheaval and the threat of HIV/AIDS — all of which are leaving young people of this age group separated from their families, and often, in the case of girls, unmarried heads of households — has brought this population to the foreground. Because there is no firm concept of adolescence, this important age group of 10- to 19-year-olds has fallen through the cracks. They

have been fighters in the conflict as well as victims, and their adjustment needs special attention.

Young people and others in Sierra Leone instead focus on "youth," which is defined within their culture as those in their older teens, twenties and thirties. There is also a general recognition of "children" as under the age of ten. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the WHO define youth as those between the ages of 15-24 and young people between the ages of 10-24. Young people between the ages of 10 and 19, termed adolescents by the Women's Commission for the purposes of this report, describe themselves as either children or youth. Humanitarian programs tend to use these same groupings. This wide definition precludes a focus on the specific needs of adolescents, leaving a large gap in the knowledge about and attention to their specific concerns, problems and strengths.

*Sierra Leonean young people aged 10-24 constitute 31 percent of the total population. Of that percentage, adolescents between the ages of 10 and 14 make up over half. Other estimates assert that youth, defined as those between the ages of 15 and 35 years old, currently make up 45 percent of the population, and that children, defined as those below 15 years, made up 44 percent of the population in 1995. The median age of the population of Sierra Leone is 17.9.<sup>3</sup>*

## YOUTH IS A BROAD CULTURAL CONCEPT

*Krio*, one of the local languages in Sierra Leone, uses different words to identify human beings in different stages of life. Children are *small pikin*; adolescents are *young pikin*; youth are *young boys and girls* or *big boys and girls*; and an adult is a *big man*, *big woman* or *big posin*. While some experts assert that "adolescence" exists in Sierra Leone, "youth" or "children" are much more common cultural con-

cepts and, as a result, younger adolescents are generally thought of as children and older adolescents are thought of as youth. Even when asked specifically about adolescents, young people responded in terms of youth and children. However, a few young people and humanitarian workers did articulate a concept of adolescence, grouping it between the ages of 12 and 20.

In Sierra Leone, youth, including the upper age limit of adolescence, is defined by fluid chronological and cultural categories. The means by which a young person transitions from child to youth to adult, or child to adult in the case of most girls, varies with their achievements, age, marriage or initiation into a secret society. The vast majority of young people told researchers that youth begins between the ages of 15 and 20 and ends between the ages of 30 and 35.<sup>4</sup> One expert explained youth's broad age limit, with its five-year leeway on either side, by saying: "Youth is a mind set: if you think you are a youth, you are. There is little other classification — you are either a youth or an elder."<sup>5</sup> Another pointed to "a cultural age hierarchy that dictates that older people call those younger than them a youth."<sup>6</sup>

Within Sierra Leonean culture, the transition from youth to adult also depends on the success achieved by the individual. Thus, the wide age range encompassing youth today can be partially explained by the difficulty in attaining educational, economic, social or political success in a country whose economy has drastically declined during the past 30 years. Asked how you become an adult, one young person said, "After you have finished your education, you are an adult."<sup>7</sup> Another said that young people transfer into adulthood when they are able to earn an income and take care of themselves.<sup>8</sup> Many young people agreed that if a person doesn't have a job, or, to a lesser extent, an education, they are still considered a youth, even if they are past 30 years old. In this way, viewing someone as an adult or elder is a compliment; it often has more to do with accomplishment than age.

The terms adolescence and youth refer mostly to boys in Sierra Leone. This is in large part because girls are considered children until they are married, when they become women. This is especially true in rural areas where the usual age for marriage is between 12 and 15,<sup>9</sup> although they do not necessarily accrue the same respect as older women. The passage from child to woman also occurs when girls are initiated into a traditional women's secret society, the *Bondo* (*Sandii* in Mende) society, which often takes

place between the ages of seven and 14. The process involves a girl undergoing a ritual, including female genital mutilation. It is estimated that between 80 and 90 percent of girls in Sierra Leone participate in these initiations. Despite criticism lodged by adolescent respondents, entry into secret societies has traditionally clearly marked their passage into adulthood, making girls ready for marriage and respected as adult women by other women. Non-members of the secret societies are considered to be children, and are often not accepted as adults by society.<sup>10</sup>

## THE EFFECT OF THE WAR ON PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH

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*"The oppressive situation of the Sierra Leonean youth coupled with the sense of marginalization [before the war] opened a window of opportunity for the rebel movement to recruit vast numbers of adolescents and young people at the very start of the civil war, a factor that actually fueled the conflict."*

— Freetown adolescent research team report, 2002

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In the 1990s, thousands of youth played a key role in instigating the decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone. All warring factions deliberately targeted civilians, with adolescents and youth disproportionately devastated by the brutal war. They were recruited by fighting forces, in contravention of the laws of war and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, to carry out the fiercest parts of battle. Adolescents and youth were both victims and perpetrators of mass maiming, killing, assault and rape. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in particular targeted and abducted disenchanted adolescents and youth for voluntary and forced recruitment. As a result, young people have been exposed to experiences that defy all social and cultural norms in Sierra Leone. The parts played by adolescents and youth in the war and the direct effects it has had on their lives have dramatically changed their role in society. Some, particularly ex-child combatants, experienced more power than is traditionally normal or accept-

## SIERRA LEONEAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A PROFILE OF SUFFERING



Total population under 18 <sup>11</sup>	2,370,000
Refugee children and adolescents <sup>12</sup>	At least 250,000
Internally displaced children and adolescents <sup>13</sup>	500,000
Maimed or tortured children and adolescents <sup>14</sup>	50,000
Abducted children and adolescents <sup>15</sup>	Over 10,000
Child combatants, including both pro-government and rebel forces <sup>16</sup>	8,000 — 14,000
Children and adolescents killed <sup>17</sup>	40,000
Number of children below the age of 15 who lost one or both parents during the war due to AIDS <sup>18</sup>	299,000 total, 14 percent
Raped and/or otherwise abused <sup>19</sup>	As many as 20,000
Percentage of married girls, ages 15-19 <sup>20</sup>	57.6 percent
Maternal mortality rate <sup>21</sup>	18 per 1,000 women
Infant mortality rate <sup>22</sup>	180 per 1,000 live births

able for young people. After assuming adult roles during the war, many young people now refuse to comply with policies and programs that do not recognize their voices and ideas in the creation and implementation of programs and policies that affect their lives.

Many other adolescents also suffered human rights violations during the war, and some now face homelessness and crushing poverty, while lacking parental support, education or jobs. Some young people now head households with as much responsibility as any adult, and they demand to have their voices heard, even though this was not traditionally acceptable.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, these adolescents still need, and are asking for, adult guidance and respect, and opportunities to continue their education or earn a livelihood.

*Policies and programs addressing youth concerns have responded to the fluid age range of youth: The National Youth Policy draft and the Youth Reintegration Training and Education for Peace Program define youth as between the ages of 15 and 35; UNICEF Sierra Leone works with youth between the ages of 12 and 24 and the Christian Children's Fund defines youth as between the ages of 18 and 35.*

Because so many young people in their twenties and thirties missed out on schooling during the war and because there are so few opportunities today, many people in their thirties and forties are unskilled and unemployed, remaining youth in the eyes of society.

Thus, the war and the accompanying lack of education and livelihood opportunities for young people have further widened the chronological definition of youth to include those aged 35 or even 40. Many young people said that people in their thirties are “still hanging on” or making up for their youth that was “wasted” during the war. An ActionAid official working with young people agreed, saying that youth is “anyone who missed out on their youth because of the war. If someone got to live their youth, they are able to move onto adulthood.”<sup>24</sup> The UNAMSIL Child Protection Adviser noted that more adolescent girls are newly perceived as youth because the war left so many female adolescents and youth as child mothers without husbands, families or jobs.<sup>25</sup>

## YOUTH WANT A ROLE IN MOVING BEYOND THE LEGACY OF MANIPULATION

*“After the war, they [youth] were being neglected by elders and government members. They can only talk to them when they need their help in the case of election time. They did not have any freedom, abusing their rights as a citizen of this land. These are some of the things that can lead a country to war. They are the future leaders of tomorrow.”*

— Secondary school teacher, Cline Town

As fighters and survivors of the war, many young people took on leadership and adult roles. They are now resisting returning to traditional roles where their views are not respected and they have little power in society. Young people want to work for the reconstruction of their communities.

However, many reported that adults, and politicians in particular, are hindering their attempts. They feel neglected by elders and deeply mistrust politicians, who they say have manipulated them for their own ends, especially during election time. Adults working with young people often agreed, saying that the culture does not allow the free flow of communication between the leaders and youth. Instead, they said

that youth are considered “inferior elements.”<sup>26</sup> Another elaborated in this way: “From time immemorial, the crude and intolerable culture of our country and tradition of our forefathers [have] not been accommodating enough for youth to vent their minds. Such strands of mentality are so stuck in the minds of most adults and elders that even at this modern time not much room is given for youths to break out their problems. On the whole, adults and elders look scornfully and disregard the views of youths. They usually say where the elders discuss, the youngsters [youth] should keep off.”<sup>27</sup>

Young people blame the lack of response on their severely limited role in politics and decision-making. They maintain that people in positions of power often indoctrinate adolescents to achieve their own “selfish” desires, and then “dump them at the end of the day without being given any responsible roles to play.”<sup>28</sup> Young people are asking the government to include them and their ideas in the rebuilding of their society. The government of Sierra Leone, and politicians in particular, must take immediate steps to incorporate young people’s rights into their daily work. This should include making the adolescent- and youth-serving ministries more responsive to young people’s voices and enacting legislation to protect their rights. Government officials should also prioritize education and skills training with practical applications for young people through development initiatives that account for their rights and capacities.

Many young people have a strong sense of their own capacity and potential. In answering the question, “What is the role of adolescence and youth in socie-



*Young people want to move beyond marginalization to real participation in society. Here they came together to support non-violence among youth during the May 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections.*

ty?” one young person said: “They normally build up the nation, correct mistakes and put things into their actual position. We also share our views to elders and we replace them in positions.”<sup>29</sup> Another explained: “We the youth are important. We are the future leaders and we also remember about the problems that are occurring in this country.”<sup>30</sup> Young people spoke of their determination to work in their communities to influence changes that will improve their lives.

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*“The youths are the leaders of tomorrow. If the government can provide them with necessary training and education, I believe they will be equipped enough to take up some of the important positions in society when the elders would have retired or died. The emergence of a youthful society who are better trained and well informed about their country’s socio-political and economic situation catalyzes rapid development and efficiency of labor.”*

— Primary school teacher, Brookfield

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United Nations, NGO and government agencies should capitalize upon these positive sentiments and build young people’s capacities by funding adolescent-focused, gender-balanced programs that involve young people in decision-making processes and program design, development and implementation. Adolescents must not be eclipsed by youth in these efforts. Both adolescents and youth can play a critical role in advancing chances for peace in Sierra Leone, and their important contributions should not be overlooked.

## V EDUCATION: A LINCHPIN FOR PEACE AND RECOVERY

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### HIGHLY POLITICIZED TOP CONCERN AND SOLUTION

Regardless of location, gender, age and experiences during the war, adolescents regard education as their top priority — they cite it as their major concern and educational opportunity as the key solution to poverty and a range of problems they face. (See Survey Results section.) This prominence of education in the thoughts of young people reflects both the politicization of education in the conflict and its force as a healing power.

Education has long been highly politicized in Sierra Leone. Student protesters in the 1970s criticized government officials for failing to make free, quality education available to all children and adolescents and cited government officials’ practice of sending their own children to expensive private schools as clear evidence of their corruption and disinterest in the welfare of all of Sierra Leone’s children. The RUF rebel group consistently invoked the government’s failure to provide free education as a rallying cry against greed and corruption, attracting many young people into their “Movement.” One young ex-RUF combatant said: “The ‘big men’ don’t care about the young people in this country. They only care for their own family and send their own abroad to study...and the youth really suffer.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, while in power in Sierra Leone’s northern region, the RUF leaders not only failed to provide free education to all, but combatants also looted and destroyed schools in many areas in Sierra Leone, fueling political flames in the opposite direction.

Today, the failure to provide adequate skills training programs and full educational support to former combatants as part of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program fuels feelings of political and socioeconomic marginalization among former rebel fighters. (See Protection section for details.) At the same time, many non-combatant young people who cannot access education resent educational support targeted for former fighters; they see themselves as the real victims and deserving of support. One adolescent dropout in Makeni said, “For some people, like the ex-combatants, education is free, but for some of us, it is not.”<sup>32</sup> These young people also express



*Adolescents say that the lack of infrastructure, classroom furniture, educational supplies and trained teachers prevent them from getting a quality education, which is critical to building peace in Sierra Leone.*

feelings of exclusion resulting from insufficient education. Without it, all young people feel that adult decision-makers believe them to be “ignorant” and do not take them seriously. Many illiterate young people also lack the self-esteem needed to advocate effectively for their concerns, and divisions between adult decision-makers and youth widen.

Adolescents and youth say their desire for education reflects practical needs. They are longing for better, more stable lives. They want to share in the bounty of Sierra Leone and to be an integral part of a society that supports and cares about their well-being. Young people believe education will and should lead to improved livelihood for themselves and thus improved stability for entire communities. They want to contribute to the peaceful economic development of the country and be treated as fully participating citizens of Sierra Leone. One adolescent living in an orphanage in Freetown said, “We need government to help us have enough logistics to learn...and we are going to feel good because we will not be neglected in the society.”<sup>33</sup> A “ghetto boy” living in Carlington, Makeni, said, “We need equal rights and social justice, a proper monitoring system of government officials, improved agricultural systems, better education and technological opportunities and improved social amenities.”<sup>34</sup>

Without education and improvements in their socioeconomic well-being, healing from the pain of the war is more difficult. (See Psychosocial section.) Young people say it also exacerbates feelings of division among them, can lead to further conflict and

has driven some into commercial sex work and crime. One adolescent boy in Makeni said, “Dropouts...contribute to the increase in rebels in this country.”<sup>35</sup> Another youth reminded researchers, “A boy was once in school before he lost his father, and without anyone to care for him he joined the RUF to safeguard his life.”<sup>36</sup> For young people, the availability of educational opportunities to all sectors of society will answer their feelings of marginalization and will be the litmus test for the achievement of peace and the protection of children and adolescents.

## INACCESSIBLE AND INSUFFICIENT EDUCATION LEADS TO LOW ENROLLMENT

Young people object to both the lack of access and poor quality of their education. Many factors, such as high costs, distant facilities, gender discrimination, destroyed education infrastructure, inadequate learning materials and lack of qualified teachers and administrators, keep them out of school entirely or prevent them from getting the education they have a right to. In addition, Sierra Leone’s prewar school enrollment was already low: only 59 percent of children were enrolled in school.<sup>37</sup>

*In Sierra Leone, primary education lasts for six years; primary school is generally attended by children and adolescents between the ages of six and 12. Primary is followed by secondary education, which is divided into two three-year cycles: junior secondary school, for 12- to 15-year-old adolescents, and senior secondary school, for 15- to 18-year-old adolescents. Ninety percent of schools are mission-run schools, with government-paid teachers.*

According to the United Nations Human Development Report 2002, Sierra Leone is “on track” in ensuring that children complete grade five but lags “far behind” in ensuring children complete primary education. Only 43 percent of boys and 40 percent of girls have access to primary school, and in

1990, 22 percent of males and 12 percent of females of relevant age were in secondary school, and 1.3 percent of both males and females were enrolled in tertiary education.<sup>38</sup> The combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrollment is now 27 percent, and adult literacy is at 36 percent.<sup>39</sup> There are significant regional disparities, with access to education and the quality of services lowest in the Northern and Eastern Provinces. Enrollment ranges from 75 percent in the Western Area to only 28 percent in the Northern Province.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, while there has been significant improvement in literacy in urban areas, with literacy close to 60 percent in the Western Area, there has been a decline in rural areas. The literacy rate is as low as 7 percent in the Northern Province.<sup>41</sup> One positive development is that 2001-2002 school year enrollments into the first year of primary school is in excess of 222,000 pupils, a 200 percent increase over the 1990-1991 figure, and that the gender gap is closing.<sup>42</sup>

While some programs specifically support education for former combatants, only a small number have been able to take advantage of them. UNICEF reported in February 2002 that 17 percent of formally demobilized children and adolescents had benefited from education programs sponsored for their reintegration.<sup>43</sup> Some others outside these programs may also be in school or skills training courses, but comprehensive statistics are not available, and the numbers are still likely to be low. Former combatants accessing skills training courses describe them as inadequately resourced and insufficient for supporting their full reintegration. (See also Protection section.)

### WAR-DEPLETED SCHOOLS

Students, parents, school officials and representatives from organizations supporting education in Sierra Leone said repeatedly that many schools are starting from zero. As of November 2001, only 1,500 of the country's 2,676 primary schools were operational.<sup>44</sup> The situation is the worst in the Northern and Eastern Provinces; for instance, in Kailahun (Eastern Province), the sole secondary school was opened only in April 2002 after being destroyed in 1996.<sup>45</sup> In addition to school structures, furniture, latrines, teaching and recreational supplies, textbooks and other basic scholastic materials have been depleted, and in many cases, so has the quantity of qualified teachers and school administrators.<sup>46</sup> Young people in formal or non-formal schooling say that there are no

seats to sit on or desks to write on, no paper, pens or pencils, no textbooks or grade books and no sports equipment. Those in skills training especially lack facilities for practical learning.

In a displaced persons camp in Freetown, young people noted the lack of "blackboards, tables, chairs and notebooks for the school children."<sup>47</sup> One teacher in Makeni said that many students have to "sit on the floor" and that instructors have nowhere to keep what supplies they do have.<sup>48</sup> One ex-combatant youth in a skills training program in Makeni said, "We are supposed to sit two on one bench, but we sit six on one bench."<sup>49</sup> Former combatants enrolled in skills training state major frustrations with significantly under-resourced programs, leaving them inadequately trained and without the tools needed to carry out their trade. (See Protection section.)

This lack of scholastic materials and other supplies keeps many students who cannot afford to buy their own from attending school. One orphaned adolescent working on the street in Makeni said, "We want to go to school, but we don't have any school materials."<sup>50</sup> It also places additional economic burdens on parents already stretched financially. But many parents are dedicated enough to their children's education to provide additional support for schools instead of waiting for the government to resurrect the system. In Makeni, teachers and parents pooled resources to construct new benches for schools, in one instance paying 1,000 leones (about US\$0.45) each for a total of 100 benches.<sup>51</sup>

For many schools, the only support has come through education programs for former child combatants that are designed to maximize benefits to the entire community. The Community Education Investment Program (CEIP) provides packages of supplies to schools in exchange for enrolling ex-combatant children and adolescents. At St. Joseph's Primary School in Makeni, head teacher Fatu Kanu said that because their school has taken in eleven ex-combatant children, they have finally received much-needed supplies that benefit all students.<sup>52</sup>

### EDUCATION UNAFFORDABLE

Although the government instituted free primary education by waiving school fees for students in September 2001,<sup>53</sup> in reality, many young people say they are still unable to go to school or participate in other educational opportunities. They cite high costs



for transportation, school uniforms and scholastic materials as key barriers.

Competing responsibilities also keep many adolescents out of school. With little family income, they are often forced to find work instead, or to work to pay for their younger siblings' education. For many, the choice is of securing a meal or attending school. Teen parents are in an especially difficult position, with responsibility for providing for their own children. Many are also faced with the priorities of reconstructing their homes and revitalizing their farms, which make attending school during regular school hours all but impossible.

One adolescent girl now working in a saloon in Makeni said, "Education in the community is not easy because it is too expensive." Another said, "We cannot go to school because of poverty, so, we decided to take a job to provide education for our children."<sup>54</sup> And a displaced adolescent in Freetown said, "My parents cannot provide school fees toward my education, and there is no job facility for them to assist me."<sup>55</sup>

In addition, some claim that education officials are corrupt, asking for payments from students, which also increases their costs. All of these costs are often too much for Sierra Leoneans to afford given highly limited livelihood opportunities for parents. An Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating allegations of school authorities extorting money from parents and students with impunity. A Freetown newspaper reported in August 2002 that a local school was reportedly demanding 5,000 leones (US\$2.44) from each pupil before the school authorities would issue National Primary School Examination Results and Report Cards.<sup>56</sup> Some parents paid the fee, and those who refused did not receive their children's results. These and charges from other areas are under investigation.

If they complete primary school, for many young people, secondary school and vocational and skills training are even more financially burdensome and out of reach. (See Livelihood section.) They cited the age of 15 as a pivotal time for children to drop out of school, especially girls, corresponding generally to the age after the completion of primary school and, for some, junior secondary school. Many dropouts become idle and have a severely limited support system, forcing many into prostitution and criminal activities. (See Protection section.)

While costs may vary slightly, the educational sup-

plies and uniforms for primary school, where tuition is free, can run as high as 250,000 leones (US\$120) a year. There is a steep increase in expense from primary to junior secondary school, for which tuition and supplies cost between 400,000 and 500,000 leones (between US\$195 and \$240) a year for government schools and 600,000 to 700,000 leones (US\$295 to \$350) for private schools. Senior secondary school costs 700,000 leones (US\$350) a year, as does the University of Sierra Leone.<sup>57</sup> These expenses, particularly for secondary school and university, are largely prohibitive in a country where the estimated annual per capita income was US\$140 in 2001.<sup>58</sup>

### Without School, Paths Into Trouble Emerge

*At 11 years old, Paul was forced to quit primary school in Class 4 when his father, a minister, died. His mother did not have enough money, and "was not capable of furthering my schooling," Paul said. His mother took Paul to learn mechanical engineering from his uncle, but after a few months, he left when his mother found him a job paying 90,000 leones (US\$44.00) monthly. "While in that job," Paul said, "I found myself in the middle of a court case and was found guilty. I lost the job and was at home doing nothing except thinking about my father and the job that I lost. I decided to go to one of the provinces and become a diamond miner. After six months, I returned back with nothing I had hoped for. At home, I joined with some bad boys who were armed robbers as they were going out for their night's work. The police caught us immediately, and we were sent to jail by the court for seven years. I was released after four years and am now home again with nothing to do. I want to know what better programs can be put in place for adolescents and youth like me."<sup>59</sup>*

## TEACHING RESOURCES STRAINED

The education system is suffering from a shortage of teachers. Again, considerable regional disparities exist: the teacher to pupil ratio ranges from 1:23 in the Western Area to 1:82 in the Eastern Province.<sup>60</sup> In April 2002, the government was short approximately 1,000 teachers and will be short an estimated 3,000 in 2003 and 7,000 over the next five years. Teachers working in refugee camps in Guinea are available to fill many of these vacancies, but the government of Sierra Leone has been reluctant to recognize their qualifications, citing concerns about maintaining standards. Those trained as part of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) school system, serving refugees in Guinea, are participating in a distance learning course to fill any gaps in their qualifications, and those who are qualified but lack the paperwork to prove it are also being assisted.<sup>61</sup>

Some qualified teachers inside Sierra Leone are displaced and are receiving mandatory salaries from the government but are not in service. At the same time, others in service are frequently not remunerated for their work or receive their pay late. Teachers in general receive low salaries; junior teachers on average earn 66,000 leones per month (about US\$30), and senior teachers earn 297,000 leones per month (about US\$135). Teachers in service lack adequate teaching materials and endure difficult teaching conditions, with severely limited facilities. In addition, UNICEF and students said that the content of their education is not always relevant to their lives and that there is a high level of inefficiency in school management.

Young people are acutely aware of the consequences. As one orphaned adolescent said, “Our teachers are not paid on time, and sometimes they are not paid.”<sup>62</sup> Another adolescent said that because of this, “...they do not teach effectively.”<sup>63</sup> In general, adolescents and teachers said that this creates poor learning environments and a brain drain, where teachers are attracted to opportunities in other countries for better pay.<sup>64</sup> Some teachers have also not returned home since the war’s end, remaining in Freetown for a better livelihood and not yet prepared to invest in the reconstruction of their homes and communities, which are in ruins. Many come from the most destroyed areas of Sierra Leone — Kambia, Kono and Kailahun.

Teachers have few resources of their own to supplement scholastic materials in school, and students are

afraid their teachers will no longer be willing to continue their work. A primary school girl in Makeni told researchers that her teachers are not satisfied because the government holds onto their salaries without paying them. “To encourage them to teach us,” she said, “we share our lunch with our teachers.”<sup>65</sup>

## LESS ACCESS IN RURAL AREAS, ESPECIALLY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

“Those in big towns have access to education, not us,”<sup>66</sup> one rural youth told researchers. For adolescents living in rural areas, schools are often too far away to attend, especially secondary schools. Those who wish to go to secondary school must find funding either to attend boarding school or pay for transportation back and forth from home each day. Again, these costs are exorbitant and impossible for most Sierra Leoneans, and rural adolescents and youth are at a particular disadvantage. While reaching secondary schools in busy Freetown is also very difficult for many students, there are more secondary schools there in general.

In York district in the Western Area, adolescents can attend classes one through six, but the nearest secondary school is ten miles away. Although adolescents also believe education to be better in the towns, they do not have enough money for transportation. They ask for more secondary schools to be constructed in rural areas and that free transportation be provided for young people living a prohibitive distance away.<sup>67</sup>

In Makeni, a representative of the Inspectorate Office for the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS), told researchers that all of Bombali Chiefdom has 265 primary schools, most of them operated by religious groups, and 20 secondary schools, the majority located in Makeni town. Not all of these institutions are yet functional. Bombali also has several technical and vocational training centers, most in or near Makeni town, and before the war had a tertiary institution — Makeni Teachers College — which has operated in Freetown since the conflict. Thus, if young people seek secondary or tertiary education, most must be able to reach Makeni town to access it.<sup>68</sup>

## GIRLS' EDUCATION

Girls report particular difficulties entering and staying in school due to widespread gender discrimination. Sixty percent do not attend primary school, and 88 percent do not attend secondary school.<sup>69</sup>

Girls say that when families have few resources, parents prioritize boys' education over girls'. They also say that girls are often not expected to go to school at all, and instead are expected to tend the house and prepare for eventual marriage. Girls who are in school and either get pregnant or married are expected to quit school. Although the legal framework exists for the continuation in education of pregnant girls, it is rarely enforced. Girls who were formerly abducted by the RUF and are now adolescent mothers say they have particular difficulty entering school given their responsibilities caring for their children and due to the stigmatization they encounter in school. In addition, girls' enrollment is lowest in the north, at only 25 percent, where there is a strong perception that their education is inconsistent with the teachings of Islam.<sup>70</sup>

Without education, girls have fewer opportunities to learn livelihood and other skills and receive basic health information. Many say that lack of educational opportunities, linked to lack of livelihood, is leading them into prostitution in large numbers. This prostitution is at times condoned and encouraged by their parents. (See Protection section.)

A Makeni teacher said of adolescent girls in need of primary education: "Some are really big in school and refuse to go because they are too ashamed. They are afraid and say they just want to get married. They need counseling."<sup>71</sup> Adolescents say community sensitization is needed to promote girls' education. Some suggest a poster campaign and seminars for parents, stressing the importance of education for both girls and boys. Some suggest, too, that education officials should be required to ensure that as many females are in school as males at all levels.

The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) is dedicated to addressing girls' education problems in Sierra Leone. During the war and in recent years, it provided emergency programs as a stopgap for girls, including formal education, vocational training, counseling, medical care, recreation and a variety of other services. Thousands of girls have benefited from the work, including many who suffered sexual violence or are child mothers. Today, FAWE continues to provide formal education and



*Fewer girls than boys attend school, and those caring for children have an especially difficult time overcoming stigmatization and balancing their other responsibilities.*

psychosocial care to girls, and advocates for their education and protection.<sup>72</sup>

### Literacy Lightens Up A Life

*Mary, 16, lives in Freetown. She says she "[had] never been to school growing up. I wanted to go, but any time I told my parents this, they discouraged me, saying that school is only for males. They had money for fees, but I still could not go, and instead, I usually did housework and cooking. I often felt left out of social activities, especially because I could not go to any educational programs. One day, a friend advised me to attend an adult literacy class offered by FAWE. At first, I was not happy to be there, but as time went on, I believed I could make it because I was actually learning to read and write. Now, I am very happy. I feel very well, like there is a bright light, and I wish that education could be spread throughout my community, irrespective of age or sex."<sup>73</sup>*

## EDUCATION FOR IDPS AND FORMER REFUGEES

Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are beginning to return in large numbers to their home communities. Children and adolescents among them are encouraged to enter school upon return, placing added stress on education institutions that are still far from up and running. Approximately 89 percent of adolescents who participated in the Women's Commission and adolescent researcher study said they had been displaced, and 20 percent were former refugees. While they share educational facilities with local communities, they say access is not guaranteed, again due to high costs, competing responsibilities and gender discrimination. They also say that classes are overcrowded, and point to a lack of learning materials and basic facilities.

Many refugees who fled Sierra Leone to neighboring Guinea had access to formal primary education through a successful and highly-regarded program run by the IRC. Bolstered by a strong education, many returnees are going home wanting more, especially in rural communities where educational opportunities are most bleak. Like refugee teachers returning home, the qualifications they achieved in exile are being questioned by the government and require resolution. Some still in exile are having difficulty gaining access to the West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams they are required to take to complete secondary school as WAEC rules insist the exam must be taken in their home country. At the same time, many young refugees return lacking years of formal education, as well as training in agricultural farming, which they would normally have learned from their families. Education providers are challenged to meet both sets of needs to ensure the recovery of these communities.

Many IDP and former refugee adolescents told researchers that they value education so highly, they are willing to separate from their families in order to receive it. For example, former refugees in the Jui temporary settlement near Freetown said they would be staying behind to complete the school year while their relatives went back to their homes. They were not sure where they would live or how they would find food, but they were determined to complete their academic year. Similarly, reintegrating former child soldiers expressed worry about being reunited with family members prior to completing skills training courses or formal education classes. (See Protection section.)

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS IN SCHOOL

Although United Nations figures place formal education enrollment at 27 percent overall, and young people interviewed agreed that their access to education is low, 70 percent of the adolescents who answered the survey conducted by adolescent researchers said they were currently attending school. As the research teams did not deliberately focus on interviewing more in-school than out-of-school adolescents, it is not clear what kind or quality of education they were in. This high figure might represent young people's participation in poorly resourced, makeshift schools in their communities. It might also represent participation in skills training classes or occasional attendance in education activities. Furthermore, these enrollment figures hide the disruption in education that many adolescents have experienced, and it is estimated that 500,000 children are significantly older than the normal age for the class that they are attending.<sup>74</sup> Given the state of the education system, however, their engagement in some form of education activity is a testament to their desire to learn.

## SPECIFIC EDUCATION INTERVENTIONS

Despite the many challenges that remain in reconstructing Sierra Leone's education system, the Sierra Leone government, UNICEF, a host of NGOs and community members have worked hard to prioritize its rehabilitation. They have begun work in areas almost immediately after they have been declared secure and have kept the politicized nature of the endeavor in mind. NGOs have also worked to increasingly link education and protection efforts, and believe that government personnel especially need substantial training on the protective aspects of education for children and adolescents and on school administration and governance in general.

The World Bank is providing Sierra Leone with a US\$20 million loan for the rehabilitation of the education system, and the government of Sierra Leone is focusing on raising the minimum baseline standard for education. The focus is mainly on revitalizing primary education, not secondary or tertiary education. This is important work but does not sufficiently address the predicament of adolescents and youth, who have missed out on their education and are feeling marginalized. In addition, while the African

Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank will be building a total of 700 schools across the country within the next five years, 600 of them will be primary and only 100 will be junior secondary schools.<sup>75</sup> Again, the focus is overwhelmingly on primary at the expense of secondary school.

Josephus Williams, Director of the Youth Division of the MEYS in April 2002, said that “the government cannot absorb the number of school leavers,” and that more avenues for skills development and economic opportunity for adolescents and youth must be developed. “The government is challenged to move from talk to action,” he said, and it focuses on the creation of “productive activities for youth.” Given the vast needs in Sierra Leone, however, he said that “no amount of funding will be enough to fully address the youth of this country” and that the government is emphasizing the “systematic rehabilitation of the education system”<sup>76</sup> to increase opportunity for as many young people as possible.

A range of education interventions has been initiated, including education for former combatants; accelerated learning; school reconstruction; material supplies; teacher training and certification initiatives; the

development of teacher and parent associations; student certifications; school feeding; education for the disabled; and education for girls, including child mothers and the sexually abused. Again, despite these efforts, many more young people need to be reached in order to fulfill their right to education and begin to alleviate their feelings of marginalization.

Education on health and other issues for young mothers should continue. Access to education for returning refugees and IDPs should continue, and more should be done to ensure the continuity of education for young people who are still displaced or are reintegrating. Young displaced students who do not want to return until they have finished their terms need protection and assistance. The same holds true for reunifying families. Skills training should be connected to reconstruction and development needs. Parental involvement in education is critical, and communities should not wait for the government, especially because programs will end, and they will need to keep going.

## National Education Initiatives

**The Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS)** program compresses the six-year primary curriculum into three years, enabling over-age, out-of-school children and adolescents to return to the formal system in the right age group.

**The Community Education Investment Program (CEIP)** provides materials to schools in exchange for accepting former child soldiers and waiving their enrollment and tuition fees. As of November 2001, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) and NGO partners (Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI, an Italian NGO), the IRC and Caritas) had extended CEIP to over 130 primary and secondary schools in all districts except Kono.<sup>77</sup> Schools can choose from one of four CEIP packages that benefit the entire school, not just the students who are former child soldiers. One package, for example, includes exercise books, pens, pencils and sharpeners, and another is a recreation kit, including footballs, inflating kits, volleyballs, a net and whistles.<sup>78</sup>

**The Training and Employment Program (TEP)** is designed to assist those who complete skills training in finding jobs and to distribute start-up tool kits. TEP and other education programs are especially good in that they benefit both the overall population and specific groups. Having said this, it still appears that some groups are favored over others, and community-based skills training initiatives for the broader community should be supported.

**The Rapid Response Education Program (RREP)** supports the re-entry of IDP and refugee returnee children between the ages of 10 and 14 into the formal primary system through a six-month program focusing on numeracy, literacy, trauma healing, peace education and health.

## ACCELERATED EDUCATION

Many young people have missed years of education due to the conflict and cannot easily step back into formal learning environments. Some feel they are too old, too tall or otherwise physically mature to sit in classes with younger students and say they would be ashamed to do so. Adolescent mothers have particular difficulties re-entering the school system, as they are normally expected to quit school upon marriage or pregnancy. Adolescents also find it difficult to spend the required amount of time finishing a full course of primary school, given other family and emerging adult responsibilities.

Despite these barriers, some say they would gladly confront these difficulties if they had the financial

means, childcare or other support to do so. One adolescent girl who was abducted by the RUF and is now a child mother said, “I would like to go to school, I don’t mind about my height.”<sup>79</sup> Adolescents facing large gaps in their education would benefit from accelerated learning opportunities in order to catch up with primary school years and continue their studies into secondary school and beyond. Those who cannot or choose not to attempt formal schooling also need targeted livelihood interventions.

The government has undertaken accelerated learning programs, implemented by NGOs. They include CREPS and the YouPac, a literacy and life-skills program for out-of-school adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18. (See International Response section and information box in this section.)

# VI. LIVELIHOOD: YOUNG PEOPLE NEED SKILLS AND JOBS

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## BLEAK ECONOMY LEAVES ADOLESCENTS WITH FEW LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

Sierra Leone’s conflict was rooted in high unemployment and lack of economic opportunity. Feelings of political and economic marginalization and uneven distribution of resources led many, particularly youth, to participate in the conflict against the government. These conditions remain true today, as the war worsened the country’s already bad economic situation. Unemployment is as high as 80 percent,<sup>80</sup> making it difficult for anyone, let alone adolescents and youth, to earn a livelihood. Sierra Leone was ranked the least developed country in the world among 173 countries in the United Nations 2002 Human Development Index. In 2000, the gross national income per capita was US\$140, compared to US\$34,870 in the United States.<sup>81</sup> Although real GDP increased by 3.8 percent in 2000 against a population growth rate of 2.6 percent, this followed a cumulative decline of 25 percent during 1997-99 and approximately 66 percent since 1970.<sup>82</sup>

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*“Youth constituted about 95 percent of the fighting forces because they finally let loose. They are a long-neglected cohort; they lack jobs and training, and it is easy to convince them to join the fight. Therefore, youth have to be given attention and made useful in their communities, such as through learning basic skills. Idleness could lead again to war.”*

— Christian Children’s Fund official,  
Freetown

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Youth in their early twenties interviewed for this study were more concerned about employment than adolescents under twenty. While both adolescents and youth ranked poverty as their second top concern, adolescents ranked unemployment as their fifth highest, whereas youth ranked unemployment as their fourth highest concern (tied with lack of shelter/food/water/clothing). Moreover, youth gave their concern about unemployment a significantly higher average ranking than adolescents. (See Survey