



# COUNTRY AT A CROSSROADS

## Challenges Facing Young People in Sierra Leone Six Years after the War

### WHY WE WENT

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children traveled to Sierra Leone in February 2008 as part of its Displaced, Out-of-School Youth Initiative, a three-year global research and advocacy project that seeks to increase attention and support for quality programs for displaced young people.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the week-long visit was to assess young people's needs, what services appear to be working, gaps in programming for young people and what more is needed. The delegation, comprising one staff member and two board members,<sup>2</sup> spent time in the capital, Freetown, and in the east, Kenema and Kono districts, the region most impacted by the war. The delegation met with nongovernmental organizations, UN agency staff and young people in and out of school.

### KEY FINDINGS

Six years after the war ended, young people in Sierra Leone continue to be marginalized and lack opportunities. At a time when international support is waning, the country is at a critical juncture. Greater investment and attention to young people is urgently needed, in particular:

- quality education, which requires that teachers get paid a living wage;
- opportunities to get back into the formal school system through catch-up classes to make up for years lost because of the war;
- investments in keeping young people in school, including income generation for families to make up for lost income when their children go to school; and
- skills training that is directly linked to market demand for young people for whom formal school is not an option.

Young people will continue to play an important role in the country's stability and reconstruction and, as such, demand much more attention and support.



### *Snapshot of a Country Devastated*

Sierra Leone is still recovering from a brutal 11-year civil war that ended in 2002—a war that left 50,000 dead and displaced 2 million people, nearly half of its population.<sup>3</sup> Most of the combatants were children and young people, who were forced to commit serious human rights violations, including terrorizing civilians and amputating limbs. Rape was endemic.

Today, Sierra Leone is ranked lowest in the world on the UN Human Development Index.<sup>4</sup> One in eight women dies during pregnancy or childbirth,<sup>5</sup> compared to one in 8,000 in the developed world. One in four children dies before reaching his or her fifth birthday.<sup>6</sup>

Sierra Leone has a very young population, with more than 31 percent between 10 and 24 years old.<sup>7</sup> During the war, many were forced to fight, to flee or to work as prostitutes or in the diamond mines. Less than one-third of females over age 10 can read and write.<sup>8</sup> Without access to school and with few economic opportunities or skills, young people are often left idle and are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and economic exploitation.

# WHAT WE LEARNED

## BARRIERS TO QUALITY EDUCATION PERSIST

Despite the government's commitment to education and a recent surge in primary school enrollment, too few young people are going to school and staying in school. Although primary school is compulsory and "free," many families cannot afford related costs for uniforms, transportation and books. The quality of education is for the most part poor with very high student-to-teacher ratios—it's not unusual for classes to have 120 students. A large percentage of teachers is unqualified or uncertified.

While the government abolished primary school fees, secondary school fees are \$66 a year,<sup>9</sup> putting school out of the reach of many in the country, where the average annual income is \$249.<sup>10</sup> Only 12 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds are in junior secondary school and only 6 percent of 15- to 17-year-olds are in senior secondary.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, poverty forces many young people to work to support their families rather than attend school. Pregnant girls and young mothers generally drop out of school to care for children. Sixty-two percent of girls marry before age 18.<sup>12</sup>

Wherever the Women's Commission delegation traveled, it heard—both from teachers and others—that teachers are paid too little and too late. Those who are paid (and many are not) generally make the equivalent of \$30 a month. (Principals may earn more, about \$90 a month.) Many of the best teachers prefer to work for nongovernmental organizations that offer higher salaries.

### **What Works: Accelerated learning programs**

One impressive program is the Ibis Complementary Rapid Education for Primary School (CREPS) Programme. It condenses six years of primary school into three years for more than 3,000 girls and boys who missed school during the war. It also trains teachers while at the same time putting them to work in classrooms—thereby creating a new generation of teachers. CREPS was developed by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and has been implemented by a number of relief institutions, including the Norwegian Refugee Council.

### **What Works: Helping teachers get paid what they deserve**

The Women's Commission is working with several organizations (the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children Alliance, UNICEF, UNESCO and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) to address the challenging issue of teacher compensation in situations where governments are unable to or unwilling to pay salaries.<sup>13</sup> This inter-agency group is holding a series of workshops where educators, government officials, donors, academics and staff from nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies are coming together to develop guidelines to help ensure that teachers are paid regular, equitable salaries in situations of displacement as well as in post-crisis countries.



### *Princess Diddy Pratt: A Commitment to Teach*

**She started with 50 girls, many she called "rebels" — and opened skills training centers to teach masonry, tailoring, hairdressing, reading, writing and math. Princess Diddy Pratt belongs to FAWE, the Forum for African Women Educationalists — a pan-African nongovernmental organization founded in 1992 to promote girls' and women's education in sub-Saharan Africa. Princess Diddy Pratt's school now has 11 teachers with about 75 girls in a classroom. Her focus has remained on primary school, because she says more money is available for that age group, both in her country and internationally. Her teachers get paid about \$30 a month. In a country where most girls are married by the age of 18, Princess Diddy Pratt is challenging that norm by providing girls with an alternative. "[I] want parents to understand that women deserve an education," she says.**

## YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO MAKE A LIVING

There are very few jobs in Sierra Leone despite it being rich in natural resources. An estimated 70 percent of youth are unemployed or underemployed.<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of young people work in the agricultural sector, and more than 60 percent of them do not get paid.<sup>15</sup> Unable to earn money, many young people migrate to cities where most survive through petty trade and services, such as selling in markets. However, the majority does not make enough to earn a living. Those who have access to vocational training programs are too often trained in skills for which there are no jobs. Gender-stereotyping is common, with girls often steered into lower-paying jobs, such as hairdressing, tie dying and cooking. Most important, though, is the fact that there appears to be a disproportionate focus on labor supply rather than on stimulating labor demand. The result? Not enough jobs to absorb young people.

### **What Works: Practical education that is linked to market demand**

Skills training programs run the gamut from nonformal to formal and most of the programs the Women's Commission visited appeared to be completely labor—instead of market—driven.

**The Women's Commission found that the most effective youth programs are those that combine education and vocational skills training so young people can earn money while going to school, or learn literacy skills while being apprenticed in a trade.**

### **Additional important elements include:**

**Community Involvement:** One initiative that appears to be making a difference is **IRC's CYCLE** program, Countering Youth and Child Labor through Education. CYCLE is a four-year, U.S. Department of Labor-funded initiative. It aims to prevent and respond to exploitative child labor by taking children and youth out of dangerous labor, such as mining and prostitution, and putting them into school or skills training programs. Its strengths include its holistic approach, community involvement, ongoing monitoring and provision of starter kits, which contain tools or supplies needed to get established in a trade. CYCLE also relies on many local partners for implementation, thus building local capacity and increasing sustainability. Transparent plans are being developed to phase out the project and turn it over completely to local communities in 2009.

**Sports as an entry point:** The Canadian organization **Right To Play** uses sports to get young people involved in activities that impart important life skills and messages, such as HIV/AIDS prevention, conflict resolution and sensitivity for people living with disabilities. Right To Play builds local capacity by training young people as "Coach Leaders," who run activities, train other community volunteers and serve as role models for younger children. It has reached almost 15,000 young people in Kono district, bringing its programs to local organizations and schools.

**Youth-led programs: Search for Common Ground** uses media as a tool to help young people express themselves. With its Talking Drum Studio program, young people create and produce their own radio programs that air on all 11 stations in the country. Programs cover timely topics for youth, such as HIV/AIDS, pregnancy and street children. As with most youth projects visited, Search for Common Ground staff said they are in need of more funding.

**Committed, strong leader:** The local organization **Brave Hearts** is the brainchild of Amienatta Conteh, a nurse, who was concerned at the plight of street children, especially those with disabilities, and did something about it. As Conteh explained, "Life is not supposed to be like that." The organization currently serves 55 children, many of whom visit the center during the day to hang out in a safe environment and get informal literacy training. She is building a small complex of cement buildings in Kono, and hopes to provide nursing and midwifery training, a vegetable garden for the disabled, a bakery and an orphanage, but does not have enough funding.

### *Regiana: From Sex Worker to Aspiring Journalist*

**After surviving for four years as a commercial sex worker in Kono, Regiana was rescued by IRC CYCLE workers who helped her turn her life around. Now in junior secondary school and president of a girls' club, she likes English and math and hopes to become a journalist. "I want to give news [about Sierra Leone] to the world," she says. The Women's Commission delegation joined her at a CYCLE donor and partner meeting in Freetown, where she conducted herself with such poise and confidence that it was hard to believe what she'd been through in her 15 years.**



# WHAT WE RECOMMEND



The delegation found that, first and foremost, young people need access to quality education, which requires trained teachers who are paid an adequate, regular salary. For the many young people who have missed out on years of school during the war, they need catch-up classes that condense six years of primary schooling into three years and allow them to re-enter the formal school system. And those young people for whom formal school is no longer an option need practical training that combines basic reading, writing and math along with skills training that prepares them to enter the work force. Partnering with the private sector is essential to ensure both that young people are trained in jobs that are needed and attention is given to expanding the market.

**The following recommendations are for the Government of Sierra Leone, in partnership with local communities, international and local organizations, the private sector, UN agencies and donors:**

**1. Develop strategies to compensate teachers in the short and longer term.** In the short term, this might require external support for teachers' salaries. Any international support, however, must ensure that the government is involved and that payment is coordinated and aligned with existing government policies. Clear plans must be in place to phase out external funding and turn responsibility over to the government.

**2. Expand accelerated learning programs,** which condense the number of years of schooling (generally six years into three). Second-chance educational opportunities allow over-age and working youth an opportunity to enter/re-enter the formal school system. Invest in strategies that not only get young people in school, but keep them in school, including income generation for families where possible.

**3. Increase comprehensive programs that combine functional literacy with market-driven skills training through partnering with the private sector.** Faced with many responsibilities, young people require practical education that is flexible and responds to their many needs, including basic literacy and numeracy, and skills training that is directly linked to market needs and builds on existing skills of youth. The private sector should be included in curriculum development and incentives provided for businesses to increase apprenticeships for youth. Programs should not reinforce gender stereotypes, but rather work with elders and the community to empower young women and provide them with greater opportunities, such as through the provision of child-care.

This report was researched, written and edited by Marsha Zeesman, director of strategic affairs, Jenny Perlman Robinson, protection program officer, Diana Quick, director of communications, Dina Dublon, board co-chair, and Jocelyn Cunningham, board member. Background research was conducted by Mary Jane Escobar-Collins, operations officer, and Emily Bishop, intern. Logistical support for the field assessment was provided by the International Rescue Committee – Sierra Leone.

Photos by Jocelyn Cunningham and Dina Dublon.

**For more information, visit [womenscommission.org](http://womenscommission.org)**

## Endnotes

- 1 For more information on the Women's Commission's Displaced, Out-of-School Youth Initiative, visit [www.womenscommission.org/projects/children/untapped.php](http://www.womenscommission.org/projects/children/untapped.php)
- 2 Marsha Zeesman, Director of Strategic Affairs, Dina Dublon, Board Co-chair, and Jocelyn Cunningham, Board Member.
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- 13 For more on teachers' compensation, see [ineesite.org/page.asp?pid=1430](http://ineesite.org/page.asp?pid=1430)
- 14 UNDP. Draft Country Programme Document for Sierra Leone (2008-2010). [www.undp.org/africa/programmedocs/Sierra%20Leone%20CPD%20-%202008-2010%20\\_English.pdf](http://www.undp.org/africa/programmedocs/Sierra%20Leone%20CPD%20-%202008-2010%20_English.pdf), last accessed March 10, 2008.
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