Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Liberia: Key Research Findings

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The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG) at King's College London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries. The study was informed by the need to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in youth.

Specifically, we were interested in knowing how decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance, armed conflict and globalization have impacted on West Africa's young people. Our initial conviction that youth are at the heart both of the region's challenges and of its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the subsequent interest in young people displayed by international organizations like ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. Wide involvement of Liberia's youth in the orgy of inter-group/religious clashes in October 2004 and in violent crime underscores the importance of focusing on youth.

What we found in Liberia

■ The challenges of meeting the socio-economic and political needs of youth are greater on account of years of armed conflict, disrupted education and poverty in post-war Liberia.

■ Government needs to show greater commitment to addressing youth needs, especially education, skills training, employment and child soldier rehabilitation.

■ Despite their high levels of vulnerability and social exclusion, most young people are not inclined towards using violence to change their circumstances.

■ Youth in post-war Liberia are fashioning creative coping strategies for themselves and engaging the state and society through commerce, music, voting and self-help community initiatives.

Who are Liberia's 'youth'?

■ The present youth generation is the product not only of demographic factors, but also decades of poor governance and violent conflict.

■ The official delineation of youth as people between 15 and 35 years of age is more appropriate to the country's recent socio-political experience and current needs than the internationally specified bracket of 15–24 years.

■ Youth constitute up to 55.6 per cent of Liberia's 3.5 million total population.

■ The key needs of youth in Liberia are employment, education, skills training, access to justice and health care, and post-conflict psychological and social rehabilitation.

What the government is doing to assist youth

■ Policies have been formulated to address the needs of youth, like the 2005 National Youth Policy, National Youth Policy Action Plan, and National Employment Policy, all of which address unemployment through the development of local enterprise and youth co-operatives, and providing access to micro-credit.

■ However, these policies are poorly institutionalized and have had limited impact on the youth. The sole focus on unemployment, without developing education and skills training, is a major limitation.

■ Education and skills training remain expensive, unco-ordinated, of poor quality and largely inaccessible to most youth. While schools have been rebuilt and enrolment rates (especially for girls) have increased, retention and completion rates are still issues of concern, particularly for former combatants.

■ Some of the best-intentioned policies and programmes on youth are constrained by unreliable funding from government and donors, and lack any sustainable partnership with community-based youth groups and the private sector.

■ Young people's participation in decision-making processes and institutions remains thin, and government appears not to recognize this.

Outcomes of youth vulnerability and exclusion

■ In spite of government's failings in the post-war period, youth are not disposed to the large-scale use of vio-

lence to change their plight (although there are cases of crime).

- Many of the youth actively engage with the state and society in creative ways through the use of voting, sport, rural–urban migration, petty trading, artisanal trade and the formation of community-based self-help youth organizations.

- Nonetheless, some youth resort to emigration; crime; engaging in prostitution; or dependence on families, communities and peer groups for support.

What sustains youth?

- Social networks made up of families, communities, the UN and its specialized agencies, and civil society groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association, the Federation of Liberian Youths (FLY), churches, and community/tribal groups have emerged as critical sources of support to marginalized youth.

- Many youth take up informal economic activities, especially petty trading; running beer bars, video clubs and mobile phone shops (including charging); 'peen-peen' (commercial motorcycle) transportation; 'waiter market' activities; and other relevant activities to cope with the harsh realities of life.

- Youth also form community-based groups to engage the state and society. In West Point and New Kru Town, youth organize intellectual forums on issues of national relevance, and politicians and professionals are invited to these forums to speak on issues of national importance. Through such forums, youth air their views.

What should to be done?

The government of Liberia should:

- review the 2005 National Youth Policy to reflect current and newer challenges facing youth in Liberia;

- revamp education and skills training. With more than 80 per cent youth unemployment and with many young people still out of school throughout the country, the need for training cannot be over-emphasized. There should be packages for vocational training and tertiary education. More concretely, the reopening of the WVSTC in Harper, Maryland County is crucial;

- increase the co-ordination and harmonization of programmes by key government ministries, especially

those dealing with agriculture, gender and development, public works, and labour;

- repackage the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (NCDDRR) to address the residual problems emerging from the DDRR process in the country. It should address the issue of reintegration and rehabilitation properly, including drugs counselling;

- support the capacity of the FLY to constructively engage and influence public policy as it affects young people;

- intensify efforts aimed at economic recovery and the rebuilding of schools so that youth can be employed and/or educated; and

- exploit ways in which the private sector can become involved in youth issues through training and the provision of financial and other forms of support to youth programmes.

National youth groups should:

- strengthen the institutional capacity of Liberian youth associations, especially the FLY and the Liberian National Students Union, so that they can play a major role in national decision-making processes;

- increase accountability, transparency, co-operation and co-ordination among existing youth groups across the country so that they promote their common interests; and

- monitor government policies, expenditure and programmes pertaining to youth to ensure their full implementation and transparency.

DFID and other international agencies should:

- use more nuanced and flexible definitions of youth, as opposed to the current age-based criterion utilized by international agencies (e.g. those of the UN);

- make a long-term commitment to supporting and funding post-war recovery and peace-building activities in Liberia;

- provide long-term support to youth-sensitive initiatives like the Booker Washington Institute, MVTC, the Clay Basic Craft Centre and others, as these institutions have the potential to provide young people with the skills required to access the labour market; and

- support projects that assist the capacity building of Liberian youth groups and organizations.