

Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Sierra Leone: 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. 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 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 major international organizations like ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. Youth involvement in the orgy of recent political violence in Sierra Leone only a short time after the departure of international peacekeepers underscores the need for a greater focus on youth.

What we found in Sierra Leone

- 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 Sierra Leone.
- Government needs to show greater commitment to addressing youth needs, especially education, employment and participation in decision-making.
- Despite their high levels of vulnerability and social exclusion of youth, most young people are not inclined towards using violence to change their circumstances.
- Youth involvement in political violence is more common where young people lack the critical support structures of family, community-based youth groups and informal economic opportunities.
- Youth in post-war Sierra Leone are fashioning creative coping strategies for themselves and engaging

the state and society through music, voting and self-help community initiatives.

Who are the 'youth' in Sierra Leone?

- The present youth generation is the product not only of demographic factors, but also decades of poor governance, unfavourable economic prospects and violent conflict.
- The official delineation of youth as people between 15 and 35 years of age is more appropriate to the country's post-colonial historical experience and current needs than the internationally specified bracket of 15–24 years.
- Since independence, youth have on average always constituted between 31 and 33 per cent of the country's total population.
- The key needs of youth in Sierra Leone are employment, education, housing, access to justice and participation in formal decision-making processes (other than voting).

What the government is doing to assist youth

- A National Youth Policy was launched in 2003 to provide guidance on the needs of and plans for youth in post-war Sierra Leone, though the policy has had limited impact on youth.
- Government programmes are driven less by the actual needs and perspectives of youth and more by other considerations.
- The sole focus is on unemployment, without comparative attention to education and skills training, which remain expensive, of poor quality and largely inaccessible to most youth. Many female youth, for instance, are not doing well in education because of high fees and pressures of early marriage.
- Policies and programmes on youth employment are distinctively rhetorical, guided by short-term political gains, constrained by unreliable funding from government and donors.
- The limited participation of youth in formal decision-making processes is seen neither as a problem nor as something that needs to be addressed.

What happens to vulnerable youth?

- In spite of government's failings in the post-war period, youth are not disposed to large-scale use of violence to change their plight (although there are cases of localized inter-group violence related to political affiliations).
- Many of the youth actively engage with the state and society in creative ways through voting, rural–urban migration, petty trading, artisanal trade and the formation of community-based self-help youth organizations.
- Nonetheless, some youth resort to emigration, crime and political thuggery; engaging in prostitution; or become dependent on families, communities and peer groups for support.

What sustains youth?

- Social networks made up of families, communities and civil society groups are critical sources of support for marginalized youth. In places such as Makeni, Kenema and Kono, youth organizations focus on peer education, advocacy, peace education, community development and recreational activities. Violence and crime tend to be more prevalent among youth lacking these support structures.
- Youth engage in informal economic activities that include illegal diamond mining, currency exchange trade, *okada* (commercial motorcycle) transportation and cross-border commerce.

What should be done?

The government of Sierra Leone should:

- revise the 2003 National Youth Policy to reflect the changing circumstances and concerns of Sierra Leonean youth in the post-war period;
- create mechanisms to track and monitor the extent to which youth interests are integrated into the priorities, policies and programmes of the key government ministries, departments and agencies;
- support the creation of processes and structures to enable youth to engage the different government ministries and agencies responsible for implementing the revised youth policy;
- acknowledge and support the development of youth leadership and active youth participation in the civic life of their communities and national politics;
- take action to reduce or eliminate structural impediments to meaningful youth (both male and female)

representation and participation in the youth councils and formal political institutions at the local and national levels (parliament, cabinet, etc.); and

- revamp and expand educational and skills training opportunities for young people in Sierra Leone in order to reduce dropout and failure rates and increase entrepreneurial development.

National youth groups should:

- work more judiciously to encourage marginalized youth to become involved in social advocacy, activities and organizations;
- increase accountability, transparency, co-operation and co-ordination among existing youth groups across the country to ensure that the National Youth Policy is revised and fully implemented, and that youth issues, interests and concerns form an integral part of the post-war national agenda;
- encourage youth to participate and invest in state institutions and processes rather than sabotaging or exiting from them;
- monitor government policies, expenditure and programmes pertaining to youth in order to ensure their full implementation and transparency;
- support youth in combating injustice and other forms of oppression in society through non-violent and legal means.

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);
- adopt a flexible approach to policy-making and the implementation of programmes on youth. Assistance policies and programmes need to be particularly sensitive to the age, gender, spatial and socio-economic differences among the various youth populations in Sierra Leone;
- co-ordinate youth-related activities with those of other organizations in order to reduce duplication and unnecessary competition among agencies, the weakening of government capacity, or the undermining of youth services and programmes that are proving effective; and
- assist youth groups and associations to articulate their interests cogently, and to develop the advocacy and lobbying skills needed to access, engage and influence formal state structures and processes.