

After a brutal civil war, young people in Sierra Leone are trying simultaneously to build their lives and their country. Institutions and infrastructure are now being rebuilt, but opportunities are still limited. The country's 1.5 million young people need a second chance to build their skills; they need opportunities to engage in productive employment; and they need the opportunity to help rebuild social institutions for better governance. Youth make up more than a quarter of the population; they are desperate to learn, to work, to start families, and to contribute to their country's growth and development.

Sierra Leone has emerged from a decade-long conflict that displaced nearly half of the population, destroyed much of the economy and its productive capacity, and halted any progress in the development of human capital. The social costs have been incalculable. Sierra Leone is today relatively stable, but overcoming the legacy of the war and of prewar mismanagement remains an enormous challenge. The country's renewal must address widespread corruption, inefficient public services, and low investment in critical economic and social areas.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the indicators of human capital. The country ranks 176 of 177 in the human development index, and 70 percent of the population lives in poverty. Life expectancy at birth declined to 34 years in 2002, from 42 years in 1990.¹ Maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world; teenage pregnancy rates are high, as are rates of sexually transmitted infection among youth. HIV prevalence is low (1.5 percent), although many of the factors that facilitate explosive increases in HIV can be found in Sierra Leone, including widespread sexual abuse, high unemployment, chronic poverty, and commercial sex work and informal exchanges of sex for goods and services.² Roughly 40 percent of 12- to 24-year-olds and 63 percent of 25- to 35-year-olds have never attended school. Only 20 percent of 25- to 35-year-olds have finished primary school.³ All people, young and old, consistently rank education among their highest priorities, as do ex-combatants in rehabilitation programs.⁴

Sierra Leone defines youth as the period between ages 15 and 35; according to this definition, 34 percent of the population are youth. Using this Report's definition of youth, 26 percent are between 12 and 24, and 16 percent are between 25 and 35. Only 39 percent of these older youth are male, reflecting the impact of violence and migration on male youth during the conflict.⁵

With substantial assistance from the international community, the government is trying to establish three pathways for its 1.5 million young people: improve basic human capital services, enhance opportunities for productive employment, and encourage civic participation to rebuild social capital.

Human development—basic health and education for youth

Private and public investment in human development is increasing, and the government, together with local communities, has rebuilt many of the schools and clinics that were destroyed during the war. To respond to the high demand for second-chance education, programs such as Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) provides condensed education to youth forced to leave school during the conflict, benefiting about 110,000 pupils in 2004.

The government introduced free primary education for all in 2001, but many schools are supported by contributions from parents and their communities.⁶ These contributions supplement official resources—paying for supplies and repairs to buildings, and even supporting additional teachers—but they can also deter students of poorer families from attending school. The vast majority of teachers report that they are rarely paid on time; this may contribute to a teacher absence rate of 22 percent and to the practice of holding private tutoring sessions outside of school.

Progress on education is being made in spite of these many obstacles: primary enrollment has doubled since 2001; gross primary enrollment is more than 150 percent. About half of sixth-graders are older than 13, reflecting the return to schooling of many who were denied education when younger, as well as grade repetition. While access to primary school has increased significantly in the last couple of years,

many rural locations do not have qualified teachers, resulting in overcrowding and frustration. The government's target is to provide universal primary education by 2015. Access to secondary education has also doubled since 2001, but the number of places has not kept pace with demand.⁷ Besides rebuilding schools, as elsewhere in the developing world, the quality of education must be improved so that graduates are equipped with the skills the market seeks.

Shared growth—youth employment and opportunities

Sixteen percent of the population lives in Freetown; the vast majority live in small agricultural communities. Many rural youth are migrating to urban areas, especially those who feel they have limited opportunities in rural areas. Underemployment is common among both urban and rural youth, and formal-sector employment is extremely rare: 3 percent of youth are employed in the public sector, and 2 percent in the nonagricultural private sector.

While some young people would like more training, especially in areas such as business development, many others are concerned about access to land and credit. Some young people who have received skills training lack the tools required to practice their trades and have no resources to purchase them. In a survey of ex-combatants who had received some training and were working, only 28 percent had used their new skills to secure a job.⁸ Young people in focus groups also express the belief that “connections” are needed for formal sector employment. And while land is abundant, elders in many rural areas maintain strict control over land allocation, deterring youth from farming.⁹

The lack of opportunities for young people in Sierra Leone has already had devastating consequences. Are there lessons from elsewhere? In many postwar economies, such as Somalia, Angola, and



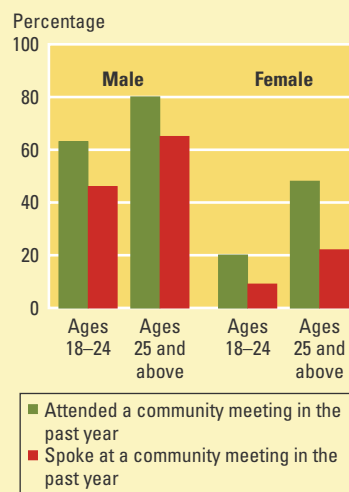
Mozambique, much of the population is likely to be engaged in “gray” or informal economic activities as the primary means for survival.¹⁰ These activities are essential for young people who have few alternatives for sustainable livelihoods or entry into the labor market. Participation in the informal sector is also a response to the lack of credit, information, or institutions that are required for a formal sector to function. As one review of the rehabilitation experiences of youth in Croatia concluded, it would be unfortunate if the continued lack of opportunities left youth “with little else but dreams.”¹¹

These examples show that it is important to focus on today’s youth through short-term interventions, such as public works programs. But ultimately investments and policy changes are required for broadly based economic growth in the medium and longer term. Key among these investments is rehabilitating the country’s physical infrastructure and social institutions.

Rebuilding trust—youth voice and governance

Traditional society is strictly hierarchical. Village elders maintain control over land, the allocation of labor, and marriage. Young people feel excluded from decision making in many communities. They are significantly less likely to believe that they can change unjust policies or laws; they attend fewer community meetings, and are less likely to speak during meetings. This is especially true among young women (see the figure). Community youth leaders, who are appointed rather than chosen by youth themselves, may not represent the interests of young people: half are over 35, and a tenth are over 50.¹²

Participation and voice are lower among youth and women in Sierra Leone



Source: Miguel, Glennerster, and Whiteside (2006) and Whiteside and others (2006).

Opportunities for the expression of voice are growing: many paramount chiefs were chosen in competitive elections following the end of the war, and the country held local elections in 2004—the first in a generation. Participation among young people was very high in these elections, and many local councilors represent a new generation of politicians.

Elders and policy makers often use the term “youth” with disdain and trepidation, to describe those—especially male—youth who are unable to provide for a family and are a potential threat to peace and stability. There is widespread concern that without better opportunities, the resentment may result in renewed violence. A recent social assessment for Sierra Leone found that the conflict was fought primarily by marginal-

ized young people, especially from rural areas, who lacked education and access to livelihood opportunities.¹³ The rebel forces took advantage of the “void of opportunities,” as one young person described it, to recruit soldiers for the war. Another youth, when asked why he joined the rebels, responded, “I had never been offered anything, they provided me new shoes and clothes.”¹⁴

The indescribable violence of the civil war created suspicion and fear, particularly of ex-combatants, making it difficult for some to return home. Reintegrating ex-combatants and other displaced people has been an enormous challenge, yet millions have returned home, and almost all ex-combatants have been reintegrated into society. Many communities have developed strong informal networks and local institutions, partly as a reaction to the breakdown of national structures; and there is some evidence that these social networks and institutions are strongest in those parts of the country that were hardest hit by the war.¹⁵

Experience in other postconflict countries suggests that the active participation of young people is a significant determinant of their satisfaction with reintegration. Increased participation may also enhance access to basic services, psychosocial well-being, and social capital.¹⁶ In turn, young people are key to postwar economic and political reforms, improving the effectiveness of rehabilitation efforts, and the transition from crisis to development. The experiences of countries as diverse as Mozambique, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam show that addressing the needs of youth and managing the transition from crisis to development requires flexibility, local knowledge, and the inclusive participation of all stakeholders.¹⁷

