

# AFRICA DIALOGUE



Monograph Series No. 1/2012

## OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT: THE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUTH IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

**Political youth: finding alternatives to violence in Sierra Leone**

**The danger of marginalisation: an analysis of Kenyan youth  
and their integration into political, socio-economic life**

**Interrogating traditional youth theory: youth peacebuilding  
and engagement in post-conflict Liberia**

**When the choice is either to kill or be killed: rethinking youth  
and violent conflict prevention in post-conflict South Sudan**



# Opportunity or Threat: The Engagement of Youth in African Societies

*Africa Dialogue Monograph Series No. 1/2012*

Edited by Grace Maina

## ACCORD

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# List of Acronyms

ACS	American Colonisation Society (Liberia)
AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
APC	All Peoples' Congress (Sierra Leone)
AU	African Union
AYC	African Youth Charter
BCPR	Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery
CD	Compact disc
CDC	Congress for Democratic Change (Liberia)
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CSO(s)	Civil society organisation(s)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
DDRR	Demobilisation, disarmament, rehabilitation and reintegration
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community for West African States
EDC	Educational Development Centre
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FGD(s)	Focus group discussion(s)
FLY	Federation of Liberian Youth
GNU	Government of national unity
GoL	Government of Liberia
GoSL	Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone
GoSS	Government of South Sudan
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit/German Technical Cooperation
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDA	International Development Association

IDP(s)	Internally displaced person(s)
IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs
IFI(s)	International financial institution(s)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
KANU	Kenya African National Union
LNSU	Liberia National Student Union
LYNC	Liberia National Youth Congress
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
MRUYP	Mano River Union Youth Parliament (Liberia)
NaCSA	National Commission for Social Action (Sierra Leone)
NARC	National Rainbow Coalition (Kenya)
NGO(s)	Non-governmental organisation(s)
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
NPRAG	National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (Liberia)
NTGL	National Transitional Government of Liberia
NYC	National Youth Commission (Sierra Leone)
OCHR	(United Nations) Office of Civilian and Human Resources
ODM	Orange Democratic Movement (Kenya)
OSD	Operational Support Division
PAI	Population Action International
PNU	Party of National Unity (Kenya)
PRC	People's Redemption Council (Liberia)
PRSP(s)	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper(s)
RSSDDC	Republic of South Sudan Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SALW	Small arms and light weapons
SFCG	Search for Common Ground

SLAF	Sierra Leone Armed Forces
SLPP	Sierra Leone Peoples' Party
SLRA	Sierra Leone Roads Authority
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SSR	Security sector reform
STD(s)	Sexually transmitted disease(s)
TPT	Tackling Poverty Together (Liberia)
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
ULSU	University of Liberia Students Union
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDDR	UN Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
UNOWA	United Nations Office for West Africa
UNPBC	United Nations Peacebuilding Commission
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UPP	United People's Party (Liberia)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YAI	Youth Action International (Liberia)
YEN	Youth Employment Network (Sierra Leone)
YEN-WA	Youth Employment Network for West Africa
YES	Youth Employment Scheme (Sierra Leone)
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YOVEX	Youth vulnerability and exclusion





# Foreword

*Kennedy Walusala*

The greatest asset of any nation is its youth. The African Youth Charter defines a youth as a person between the ages of 15 and 35 years. In his address at the 17<sup>th</sup> Ordinary African Union Summit held in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea from 23 June–1 July 2011, Dr Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of UNFPA, stated that “... if youth make up 40% of the population, and people under the age of 35 make up over 65% of the entire population of the continent, then 65% of the continent’s resources should be allocated to this age group”.

The unemployment crisis in Africa is a critical challenge to a majority of youth. This situation demands a clear policy framework, accompanied by clear budgetary allocations. It is sad that even as some of our African countries have celebrated 50 years of independence, little has been done to introduce employment policies to address youth unemployment. For the continent to realise the opportunity that comes with the numbers of youth, this population must have the opportunity to find gainful employment and the promise of a livelihood.

Throughout the history of conflict in some African states, youth have been at the frontline in waging wars that have hindered development. A mechanism to engage them is thus important for durable peace, stability and development. At this moment, the youth of the continent should be involved in planning for their future. Due to the increased challenges of the continent’s development, new dynamic energy needs to be harnessed from the youth.

Ignoring the youth is putting oneself and the continent in danger. This is the population that will change the face of Africa. This is the generation that will be held accountable for all the challenges that face the continent. The youth are our greatest asset, it is critical that we engage this youthful energy to create meaningful productivity for the development of the African continent.

Kennedy Walusala

President

International Conference on the Great Lakes Region Youth Forum



# Introduction

*Grace Maina*

There is a shift and recognition that the conversation of peace can no longer belong within the confines of a particular few elites but that, if durable and meaningful peace is to be realised, this must be a conversation of the masses. This realisation is coupled with the growing reality that there is a steady increase in the world's population of individuals that would be clustered as youth. According to the Human Sciences Research Council's Youth Policy Initiative, 90% of this youth population can be found in developing countries (HSRC). Furthermore, between 2010 and 2015, the number of youth living in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase by 19.4 million – assigning youth to 75% of the total population on the continent (ILO, 2010).

In post-conflict states, the increase of the youth population is even more apparent as significant numbers of youth are demobilised and reintegrated into civilian life. It is, therefore, imperative that in our dialogue on post-conflict states we ask ourselves: 'how have the youth been engaged?' Taking into account the massive numbers of young people and the reality of the poverty that characterises most of these post-conflict states, one is left to interrogate the place of youth in these weakly defined states. The responsibility of the sovereign is then tested by our investigation of the security of the youth population. The social contract prescribes a state in which the sovereign affords security, both in the sense of physical security and the opportunity to survive. In instances where the state is unable to ensure and fulfil this latter form of security, the international community bears the onus of ensuring livelihoods. The post-conflict community is a critical illustration of this argument: states emerging from war or extreme violence are often characterised by fragility and inability to fulfil their obligations in any social contract agreement. These states are, therefore, marked by a significant presence of the international community. The international community summarises its presence in these states as its international obligation to ensure security and overall development – which will, in turn, contribute to a safer globalised world.

The chapters in this monograph speak to the delicate challenges that face African countries when it comes to the dynamic of youth. The United Nations General Assembly defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The African Youth Charter defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years, and this can be explained by the longer time it takes for people to become economically independent on the African continent. It is important to note here that whilst it might be easy to classify youth in one group and they are often referred to in this manner, youth are not a homogenous group. It cannot be overlooked that young people face different barriers based on their gender, race/ethnicity, disability, economic status, location and other challenges that create greater marginalisation. There are several barriers that can hinder even the best-planned policies and strategies if not taken into account. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, youth unemployment levels are amongst the world's highest – about 60%. Youth unemployment is very likely to pose a threat to durable peace, and will be a driver of conflict – through direct violence, protests, criminal activity and transnational vigilantism. The rise of protest politics among disenchanted youths has grown in the recent past, with varying responses from different governments. Youth in Africa face critical challenges that can be summarised into issues of marginalisation from social, economic and political life. This inhibits their ability to make fundamental decisions that can affect their lives positively and enable them to make a contribution to society as a whole.

The chapters in this monograph examine the dynamics of the youth population on the basis of underlying relationships and social structures. The chapters seek to interrogate whether conflict and subsequent post-conflict societies enable new opportunities to change structures, so as to effect constructive change that enhances both the participation and survival of youth – and which will consequently contribute to enhancing their place as a constituency of peace. The chapter contributions also aim to contribute to works on preventative action. The presumption here is that in instances of violent conflict, youth are often assimilated as instruments of war. To transform previously war-torn societies effectively, there is an urgent need to absorb the youth population in a meaningful way, to curtail their exploitation by forces that seek power through violence. Idle populations form easier targets for violent recruitments. Thus, there is a need to understand how post-conflict states and the international community cognisant of this fact are re-engaging large masses of youth

to ensure security. An analysis of youth in post-conflict settings is imperative if we are to avert future conflict, or talk of meaningful or sustainable peace.

Through the use of case studies, this monograph seeks to share the experiences of youth in four African states: Sierra Leone; Kenya; Liberia; and South Sudan, drawing on some of the commonalities that exist in terms of youth experiences. Whilst the chapters do not seek to affirm doom theories of youth existence and conversations around theories such as the youth bulge or youth crisis, the authors do point to the real threats of ignoring and marginalising this ever-increasing population. A critical challenge when it comes to the engagement of the youth population has to do with methodology: how do we mobilise the young and harness their energy to elevate societies? How do we ensure representation of the young so as to ensure a systemised society where every individual is contributing to the general whole? In communities where governments are overwhelmed with competing priorities, how then do we ensure the mainstreaming of a youth voice? Using practical examples from the case studies, it is evident that the youth population must not be ignored, as they will find ways and means by which to participate. The chapters in this work also make clear that youth cannot be regarded as children, or dismissed as those who should only be ruled. Spaces in which youth can participate must be created and elevated.

Recent events around the globe, such as the 'Arab Spring', or past events, such as the war in Sierra Leone, continue to show that the youth population has and will seek agency so as to be heard. The chapters here illustrate the dilemmas that continue to plague that involvement and participation by analysing the post-conflict nature of the different studies and the subsequent reconstruction of those societies. Overall, this monograph seeks to discuss holistically the problems that mire engagement when it comes to the youth population by looking at economic, social, psychosocial and political facets. The chapters examine how various contributions target the transformation of structures of conflict in society, and create infrastructures for durable peace.

Underlying all the chapters is the theme that youth on the African continent cannot continue to be ignored or marginalised. At present, there are initiatives to address their inclusion – but these are far from ideal when contextualised in the sheer numbers of young people. This monograph, therefore, contributes to the much-needed exploratory work that examines the engagement of youth.

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# Political youth: Finding alternatives to violence in Sierra Leone

*Christine Cubitt*

## Introduction

Politicising violence and coercing youth into politics are historic and entrenched strategies used by political elites in Sierra Leone to pursue and attain their own ambitions in power struggles at national level. In a continuation of these deep-rooted practices, the post-war era has witnessed democratic elections marred by the intimidating tactics of some of the country's youth; tactics managed behind the scenes by others. Ten years on from the end of hostilities, the majority of the country's youth remain deeply impoverished with few economic opportunities or hopes for change, amidst a political culture that sidelines their interests. Despite new policies introduced by the government, legal and programmatic measures have been ineffective in addressing the causes and consequences of the marginalisation and illiteracy, poverty and unemployment that remain dominant characteristics of youth in Sierra Leone. In 2012, a decade after the war officially ended, Sierra Leone holds its third round of post-conflict presidential and legislative elections. It is anticipated that the polls will be characterised by so-called 'youth violence', spiralling out of control in a mêlée of interparty hostility and brutality following the recruitment of youth as personal bodyguards or security squads for politicians and competing political parties. Continued socio-economic disenfranchisement is believed to be a distinguishing factor in this worrying malaise (Zack-Williams, 2008; Utas, 2010). This sort of manipulation is in stark contrast to post-war promises made by the country's authorities to its youth population. In recognition of their systematic marginalisation in the years that led up to war, the government promised to "promote a culture of excellence" that would empower youth "to be productive members of society" (GoSL, 2002).



Throughout 2009, and again in mid-2010, there were serious clashes among youth supporting all three main political parties. By 2011, youth violence at campaign rallies resulted in one civilian death, scores injured, a physical attack on the leader of the opposition and the burning of ruling party property. Following this mêlée, the police placed a temporary ban on all political rallies, processions or public meetings. Meanwhile, the ruling party co-opted some ‘youth leaders’ and recruited a number of ex-militia – some implicated in serious attacks on political opponents – to join the Operational Support Division (OSD) of the police. Fears rose that if this practice continued, the opposition might similarly recruit from among thousands of resettled former fighters (youth), posing a grave threat to the country’s medium- and long-term security (Amnesty International, 2011). In January 2012, the Sierra Leone government purchased assault weapons worth millions of dollars to equip the OSD. Subsequent alarm among the international community prompted a statement by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), requesting that the government authorities respond “proportionately” to security threats and ensure “security forces remained committed to upholding applicable international law” (UNSC, 2012). These events suggest that, rather than “promoting a culture of excellence”, a culture of violence is being encouraged among the country’s youth.

This scenario is somewhat puzzling, given the post-war commitments made to youth by the national government and international partners. Both local and global actors made an elaborate point of focusing a magnitude of resources on post-war youth programming, influenced by the dominant discourse on a ‘youth crisis’ in contemporary peacebuilding missions (Chaudhary, 2011; Bøås & Dunn, 2007). Some of the top priorities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission<sup>1</sup> (of which Sierra Leone was one of the first beneficiaries) were to address youth unemployment, introduce a national youth policy and establish a national youth commission through an act of parliament. Civil society determined to empower and embolden the country’s youth through myriad initiatives and

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1 The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission is an extension to the UN peacemaking and peacekeeping architecture, which supports longer-term peace efforts in countries emerging from conflict. Its initial commitment to Sierra Leone in 2007 amounted to US\$35 million, with an additional US\$7 million pledged in 2010.

programmes. Promises were made to create jobs; widen participation; provide education, skills and training; and address youth marginalisation, which was at the heart of the outbreak of war (Richards, 1996; TRC, 2004; Peters, 2011). Yet onlookers still perceive this group as a potential threat to continued peace and stability, because many of the pre-conflict conditions that helped fuel youth participation in the war still exist, and the lasting psychological, social and economic impacts the war had upon them still prevail.

To provide some answers to the difficult questions these realities raise, this chapter examines post-war programming for youth engagement and development in Sierra Leone in the context of broader institutional reform, and analyses its propriety and efficacy to address the central concerns of youth as the country emerged from the trauma of war. The current orthodoxy – that the youth of Sierra Leone pose a threat to lasting peace – is contested, and the argument made that youth are, in fact, the country's best hope for sustainable development, for economic stability and for political change. It is further argued that the manipulation of youth by elite actors of all persuasions, the fragility and economic plight of the state, the lack of coherent commitment by international partners, and the pervasiveness of cultural practices, are greater threats to the country's longer-term peace and stability.

The first section provides some local definitions of youth, along with an account of their experiences prior to the war and their role when the fighting started. The second section provides more detail about the immediate post-conflict environment and the many challenges facing the youth as they were absorbed back into society. In the third section, the various post-war responses to the 'youth challenge', and the different actors involved in the process, are examined in greater detail. The final section presents an analysis of the impact of these activities in broader terms, and their relevance and efficacy in addressing the perennial concerns of the youth. The conclusion draws together the central themes and offers some constructive recommendations for policy change – suggestions that might engender better prospects for the country's youth and address the main challenges facing the nation as it moves tentatively into its second decade of peace.

## Youth and conflict in Sierra Leone

The expression ‘youth’ in Sierra Leone is associated with the age group 15–35 years.<sup>2</sup> Considering life expectancy in the country is approximately 48 years,<sup>3</sup> this group includes the majority of the adult population – a quarter of the total population. A more accurate and useful distinction, therefore, is to describe those citizens with no access or entitlement to jobs, land, property or wives; those with little or no social protection; the marginalised and powerless (Christensen and Utas, 2008:517). The definition is more helpful when it is less to do with numbers and more to do with socio-economic status and political exclusion. Youth in Sierra Leone denotes the unmarried, the unemployed and the voiceless (Ismail et al., 2009), and is almost exclusively associated with males in common parlance.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted, however, that youth are not a homogenous group. As well as a huge disparity in age, they also represent different regions and ethnic groupings, live in rural or urban areas, have different family responsibilities, and disparate levels of education.

### Experiences of youth prior to the war

Since the early days of independence (1961), the youth of Sierra Leone experienced systematic marginalisation, disenfranchisement and exploitation by both their government and traditional authority (Spitzer and LaRay, 1973; Richards, 1996). As the promises of democracy withered away, a system of patrimony became the *modus operandi*. Jobs and other privileges were shared out only to supporters of the governing regime. By the late 1970s, the authoritarian government had transformed the country to a one-party state<sup>5</sup> – a system vehemently opposed

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2 Sierra Leone National Youth Policy (2003). Available from: <[http://www.youth-policy.com/policies/SLENational\\_Youth\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.youth-policy.com/policies/SLENational_Youth_Policy.pdf)> [Accessed 15 August 2011].

3 United Nations Human Development Indices (2010). Available from: <<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/default.html>> [Accessed 26 July 2011].

4 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko, Youth Partnership for Peace and Development, 4 August 2011.

5 President Siaka Stevens' All Peoples' Congress formed the one-party state which governed from 1967 until the military coup of 1992. A referendum to change to a one-party state took place in 1978, and there was a change of leadership to Joseph Momoh in 1985.

by the country's youth population. Their resistance bore the brunt of violent government backlash (TRC, 2004) and, in protest, they became more political, revolutionary and unruly when exclusion in all its forms – economic, political, social and cultural – combined to breed grievance and resentment (Richards, 1996). Elites capitalised on the rebelliousness of young people and recruited many to their party 'youth wings' to help in political campaigning (Abdullah, 1998; Rosen, 2005:77). This involved the intimidation of opposition parties and civilians, using force and violence if necessary (Spitzer and LaRay, 1973; Forna, 2002, Gberie, 2005). In this way, politicians successfully transformed radical young reformists into violent political thugs, a practice that continues today (Utas, 2010).

Relations between the youth and traditional authority – chiefs and elders in local communities – were similarly problematic, and constructed on a deep asymmetry of power. Village chiefs and landless farm labourers, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces (Mokuwa et al., 2011), were embroiled in a deeply distorted structural arrangement where young men from poor families could not acquire farmland unless they were married. Polygamy – widely practised among rural elites who could afford the bride price (some men had as many as 10 wives) – meant that a lack of access to women was a cause of deep resentment (Keen, 2005; Mokuwa et al., 2011). 'Woman damage' – sexual relations with another man's wife – involved the payment of cash, property or labour to polygamous elites by men already living in dire poverty (Crosby, 1937; Lewis, 1954; Bledsoe, 1980). An underclass of men thereby became tied and indebted to powerful rural elites in a similar way to urban youth whose loyalty had been bought by politicians.

In the run-up to war, oppressive power structures such as those detailed above; lack of economic opportunities within rural chiefdoms; the disenfranchisement of students with no jobs to progress to; and the deprivation of a lumpen, illiterate, urban youth led to a cauldron of disquiet across the hinterland, and later in the city (Abdullah, 1998; Fanthorpe, 2005; Jackson, 2005). As the new nation began its gradual atrophy, opportunities for its young population became more and more remote, but their protestations were met with gross abuse of human rights (Peters, 2011). During the 1970s and 1980s, economic mismanagement

and shocks on the global markets pushed the country's economy into a spiral of decline, and the deterioration of the education sector created a growing number of young people unable to find work or leave home (Banya, 1993; Richards, 1996). The systematic political marginalisation of this group and their socio-economic discrimination influenced the ideological rhetoric at the vanguard of the conflict and factional recruitment campaigns during the war (King, 2007). Under the 2001–2 disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme, youth constituted the majority of the 72 000 demobilised combatants, in addition to over 6 000 ex-fighters below the age of 18 (Ismail et al., 2009:34).

### **Summary of the war and the role of youth**

The conflict in Serra Leone lasted from March 1991 to January 2002. Over the course of those 11 years – amidst coups, failed peace accords, intermittent ceasefires and democratic elections – there were around 50 000 fatalities, mass amputation and mutilation of civilians, displacement of the majority of the population and incalculable numbers of physically and psychologically traumatised citizens and combatants (Reno, 2006). Much of the country's physical infrastructure was destroyed including government buildings, schools, courts, clinics and hospitals, water and electricity supplies, roads, ports, bridges, development at the country's hydroelectric plant, whole villages and many small communities. Around 30% of educated nationals left the country (UNCTAD, 2009:74). In 1997, the economy was experiencing negative growth of minus 15% (ILO, 2010; Keen, 2005; Abdullah, 1998). By the end of the war in 2002, the country's formal economy had shrunk by 40% and all financial institutions had collapsed.

The extreme violence against civilians and the high number of children and youth among the armed factions gave the conflict its distinct character – as did the shifting alliances between the various militias, the centrality of foreign protagonists and the dominance of diamonds in funding the war. The youth who had voluntarily taken up arms – and it should be remembered that the

majority of the country's youth had not<sup>6</sup> – responded to the ideological rhetoric of educated elites in an uprising, which was to gradually change from revolution borne of genuine grievance to protracted and violent conflict fuelled by greed.<sup>7</sup> Youth fighters were not confined to the rebel forces; they also made up the majority of government troops, and forced recruits across all factions. So similar were their grievances and goals that rebels and troops eventually formed an alliance – coming together to stage a successful coup in 1997 – the product of a rebellious youth culture searching for a radical alternative to decades of corrupt rule, exploitation and marginalisation (Bangura, 1997; Peters, 2011). Girls and young women were specifically targeted during the war; some were willing recruits, but others were forced to join the rebels as 'bush wives', sex slaves, cooks, porters, scouts and fighters (Denov, 2010). The majority of the country's youth who did not take up arms found themselves forced to flee from their villages – many across the border into Guinea or Liberia, or internally displaced to urban areas. Work was hard to find and their education was disrupted or non-existent for years.

### Post-war promises to youth

The Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999 held little hope that things might change for the youth. Excluded from the negotiations, the young combatants who had fought with all armed factions,<sup>8</sup> including government troops, entrusted their interests to the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Foday Sankoh, who was interested only in furthering his own ambitions (Keen, 2005). No representative of the renegade soldiers was present at Lomé and no specific provision was made

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6 The United Nations disarmed just over 70 000 former combatants after the war – around 10% of those being children under the age of 18 (UNDDR). The estimated youth population of the country – according to the national definition – is over 1 500 000.

7 See the thesis on *Greed versus grievance* (Berdal and Malone, 2000).

8 There were several different factions that took part in the violence, as well as the two main protagonists – the RUF and the Sierra Leone Armed Forces (SLAF). These factions included the Kamajor militia, an indigenous army of local warriors; the CDF, a paramilitary organisation that supported the civilian government; and fighters from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council – a union of RUF soldiers, remnants of the National Provisional Ruling Council military junta, and disgruntled factions of the SLAF.

for the youth of the country (Gberie, 2005:157). In the absence of any tangible promises made to the youth at Lomé, the recommendations of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were crucial. This was because the continuation of corruption, discrimination and marginalisation could reinforce historic power struggles among the elite and the youth/peasantry, which had previously "suffocated the growth of democracy and good governance" and "nurtured a rebellious attitude" (TRC, 2004: Volume 3(A), paragraph 212). Unemployment among the youth was a significant factor in the conflict; the war economy was more lucrative than that of peace and the AK-47 offered higher status and engendered greater respect than the hopeless life of the streets (Cramer, 2006).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), locally referred to as the 'Agenda for Change', contained plenty of promises to support the peaceful development of the nation's youth and to create an environment that encouraged and enabled their full participation in social and economic measures that affected them (GoSL, 2001; GoSL, 2005). The PRSPs are official documents authored by national governments to secure funding and other support from a variety of international partners, and they contain commitments that bind governments to certain economic and political reforms to transform their societies after war. In Sierra Leone, promises were made to prioritise the "employment and income needs of young men and women in urban and rural areas", and to promote labour-intensive methods for the implementation of poverty-reduction programming (GoSL, 2004:98). Strategies would involve building capacity and providing training for unskilled or semi-skilled and unemployed youth, which would link them to job opportunities in the private and public sectors in both urban and rural areas. Youth strategies would also include creating the right structures for the social integration of young men and women into mainstream society, and for their participation in decision making (Ibid.).

## **Post-conflict realities for youth**

It is estimated that 1500 000 young men and women make up the youth population in Sierra Leone and that underemployment is highest among

this group. Around 70% are underemployed and over half are illiterate and unskilled, and the majority live in urban areas. Over 60% of the population live in abject poverty, unable to afford one decent meal a day, and poverty affects the youth disproportionately (GoSL, 2009). The hunger situation is “extremely alarming” and it is unlikely that the country will achieve any of its Millennium Development Goals (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). Post-war conditions have been most challenging for the youth; they include exclusion from family life and separation from kinship networks, no access to jobs or education, frustrated attempts to get involved in the decision-making process, and oppressive traditional and cultural systems (UN, GTZ and World Bank, 2010).

### **Urbanisation**

Urbanisation is a phenomenon hastened by the mass displacement of the population during the war, when people from all regions moved to cities for protection – especially to the capital, Freetown. The fighting factions recruited high numbers of young and very young. Subsequently, when the fighting ended, many youth were estranged or isolated from their families or village communities, making them vulnerable in terms of socio-economic survival. This was also the case for young people who were not involved in the fighting, who had fled from it, and who had found refuge, estranged from their families and communities, in the cities. It is estimated that almost a quarter of a million people displaced to the cities by the war were children or youths, who occupied themselves with petty trading or prostitution, or criminal activities including drug dealing and theft (GoSL, 2003).

Rural-to-urban migration remains one of the most difficult challenges for the development and engagement of the country’s youth. People continue to migrate to Freetown in search of jobs and better opportunities, improved education (especially at secondary and tertiary levels) and access to healthcare (UNDP, 2010). This migration has resulted in high numbers of people residing in overcrowded and unsanitary areas, creating “breeding grounds for crime, disease, [and] political and social volatility” (GTZ, 2010:4). The settlement pattern in Freetown is being reproduced in other major cities – including Bo in the south,



Makeni in the north, and Kenema and Koidu in the east. Young migrants bunch together in congested peri-urban neighbourhoods, transforming them into ‘youth enclaves’ of poverty, misery and despondency – “veritable mini-cities” inhabited by criminals that pose a security threat and retard development (GoSL, 2009:35). Post-conflict youth programming is therefore trying to reverse – or, at least, restrain – this advance by encouraging young people to stay in rural areas. For example, a pilot project in the underdeveloped north of the country is working to stop young people moving to the cities through a livelihoods and empowerment initiative that provide services targeted at ex-combatants and victims of war.<sup>9</sup>

## Employment

Employment opportunities have been impacted greatly by the fragility of the Sierra Leone economy, which is based primarily on the export of raw commodities such as diamonds, gold, rutile, bauxite and iron ore. Finding work – especially in the formal sector – has proved a great challenge. Formal sector employment is small, occupying less than 10% of the overall population, and levels of unpaid labour are very high – with more than 50% of urban youth and 70% of rural youth involved in unpaid work (GoSL, 2009:38). Although agriculture potentially presents vast opportunities for employment, many youth – especially men – do not want to return to the countryside due to low returns from farming, poor living conditions, contentious relationships with landed elite or the fact that they have lost their rights to land by leaving their chiefdom of birth (Unruh and Turray, 2006; Peeters et al., 2009:16). There are also other arguments that explain why agriculture has not been as strongly promoted in youth programming as vocational training. During DDR, vocational packages included monetary incentives (a monthly allowance) as well as the provision of tools, whereas the agricultural packages did not, and agriculture was not always offered as an option by implementing partners. The case has been made that this may be to do with the fact that many urban-based elites – some of them politicians – have mining concessions in remote rural areas and require a

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9 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

steady flow of cheap labour, which could be threatened by successful agricultural initiatives targeting the youth (Richards, 1996:48; Peters, 2011:200).

There are no accurate or reliable figures on unemployment; the concept is profoundly confusing and unclear in the Sierra Leone context as it embraces all sorts of sub-concepts such as 'jobless', 'inactive in the labour market', 'somewhat unemployed' or 'active in non-market activities' (Peeters et al., 2009). In the cultural context, the term cannot be understood in the same way it is used in Western developed states; although the government itself has claimed 70% unemployment among the youth (GoSL, 2009:98), this cannot be a reality because no-one can afford to be unemployed. Young people have to work, either for food or shelter, cash or payment in kind (World Bank, 2007). This work is usually casual, periodic, insecure and often hazardous, and can operate in an underworld of organised crime (GoSL, 2009:102). A more useful concept in the local context is 'underemployment', because the term 'unemployment' fails to capture the majority populace who work for perhaps only a few hours a day, or for very little reward, or who have several jobs – paid, unpaid, subsistence, for example – or who work seasonally, in the home, or who have their labour tied to landlords. Where youth do have employment of some kind, it is most visible in the agricultural sector, in the huge informal sector and among the self-employed (petty trading, carpentry, masonry, mining, etc.). The local private sector is weak and has limited capacity to provide employment opportunities, and contraction of the public sector due to liberalising reform has meant fewer jobs, or less likelihood of getting paid (Cubitt, 2011a).

### **Education and skills training**

Illiteracy rates are high in Sierra Leone: around 53% of men and only 30% of women are literate.<sup>10</sup> Due to disruptions during the war, many of the country's youth were unable to complete – or even start – their education, and though employment opportunities do exist, they are generally for those who are highly skilled and educated (ILO, 2010). People have few employable skills and there

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10 According to UNESCO. Available from: <<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/default.aspx>> [Accessed 10 October 2011].

is insufficient demand for the skills they do have (UNPBC, 2005:25). The low participation rates of girls in education and very low literacy rates among women continue to have an impact on the general development of the country and the education and security of future generations of children, as well as deepening the feminisation of poverty.

## **Mental health**

Recent surveys have shown that there is an increased incidence of mental ill-health among the youth, generally attributable to post-war effects and substance abuse (GoSL, 2009:87). This issue is of particular concern given the gross understaffing in mental health. There is one specialist psychiatric hospital in the country, serving a population of six million; one consultant psychiatrist and only two qualified psychiatric nurses; and there is no psychology, social work or occupational therapy staff. Post-war trauma support never materialised, and any programming that was available focused on former combatants, not the majority of the populace where there was, and still is, a great need for counselling.<sup>11</sup> Anticipated increases in levels of psychological morbidity, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance misuse, psychosis and affective disorders highlight the mental health challenges ahead for the country, and increased drug abuse among the youth is a growing concern.<sup>12</sup>

## **Social status**

Public perceptions of youth often act as a barrier to their employment. Characterised as lazy, undisciplined, unskilled and unreliable, they have fewer opportunities for salaried employment compared with the over 35s (Peeters et al., 2009). Youth stigma influences decisions made by employers about who

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11 Interview with John Paul Bai, Independent Youth Forum, 10 August 2011.

12 According to Dr Oyedele Ayonrinde (2008), Bethlem Royal Hospital, UK, visiting psychiatric nurse to Kissy Hospital, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Available from: <[http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/192/3/212.abstract/reply#bjrcpsych\\_el\\_26805](http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/192/3/212.abstract/reply#bjrcpsych_el_26805)> [Accessed 4 August 2011].

they take on. The age group 18–24 years is particularly vulnerable, as employers perceive this group as being less trustworthy and less cooperative than older groups. This is true of both males and females (Peeters et al., 2009:76). Public sector employment tends to exclude young people on the basis of their age and experience (Ibid.) and, therefore, formal employment opportunities are significantly lower for the youth, regardless of their skills or qualifications. Not surprisingly, the low status of youth and limited opportunities to advance breeds anger and resentment (UNPBC, 2005:25).<sup>13</sup>

### **Girls and women**

When looking at the challenges presented by the youth, locally the focus tends to be on young men, overshadowing the challenges and problems faced by young women and girls, who suffered greatly during the war. Young women are often heads of households, and have limited access to education or formal assistance programmes developed by governments and aid agencies (UNPBC, 2005:27). Those who spent time in the bush with the various fighting factions have greater challenges, with this social stigma associated with their histories (Denov, 2010). Youth empowerment as a condition for peace includes young women and girls, yet cultural beliefs constrain their participation in programming. People want girls at home to look after children or the elderly, and they have other household responsibilities. Many training initiatives involve travel to other areas of the country – neither culturally or practically viable for women.<sup>14</sup>

### **Post-war response to youth re-engagement**

In the aftermath of war, the youth in Sierra Leone wanted jobs, education, and skills training. They wanted opportunities to take control of their own lives and they wanted a government and leadership that could help them achieve their objectives (Ismail et al., 2009). In the National Recovery Strategy, promises were

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13 Interview with Charles Lahai, Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organisation, 11 August 2011.

14 Interview with Anthony Koroma, Youth Minister, 7 October 2011.

made to support them in a number of ways including job creation programming and practical skills training, assistance for community development schemes, and better access to information about health, education and life skills (GoSL, 2002).

### **Government policy**

The National Youth Policy, introduced in 2003, created the framework for supporting youth empowerment and participation efforts after the war. The policy related to engaging youth constructively so that they could contribute to the growth and peaceful development of the nation. However, it had little success due to the overwhelming post-war demands on government, which had limited capacity to deliver anything at all, and which had to focus resources on priorities elsewhere – security sector reform (SSR), for example, economic restructuring and the transformation of economic management, the re-establishment of local government and the rebuilding of infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> The Youth Employment Scheme (YES) provided work opportunities across the country, but was slow to start (2006/07). With a budget of US\$16.7 million, the YES planned to employ 4 800 youth in public works, 16 000 in agriculture and food production and another 5 000 in entrepreneurial and self-employment activities (Ismail et al., 2009:45), but these numbers were a drop in the ocean compared to the youth emergency facing the country. The scheme lasted barely six months, and discontinued just before the elections of 2007. It was replaced by revised youth policies created by the new government under its Agenda for Change. Focused on poverty reduction, the Agenda for Change promised to promote youth employment and empowerment through the establishment of agricultural farms for youth, youth enterprise development schemes, and employment in public works (GoSL, 2009:22).

In its final report (2004), the TRC advocated for the creation of a National Youth Commission (NYC), but this was delayed until 2009 when an act of parliament was eventually passed. A commission was established in 2011. At

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15 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

the time of writing, the NYC is up and running and, although inefficient in its administration, is providing youth-friendly processes and platforms for participation, and a commissioner who is committed to the job.<sup>16</sup> Some youth workers in the field are a little cynical about the headlines the government is making with the inauguration of the NYC, suggesting that this was political campaigning for the elections, or even to please “the internationals”. Best practice is being garnered from Ghana and South Africa,<sup>17</sup> however, and the commissioner is visual, vocal and promises strong commitment to the job. This development offers a unique and opportune moment for international partners to influence politicians and throw their full weight behind coordinated and relevant long-term policy to support youth.

National Youth Dialogue Forums allowed young people to get involved in all stages of consultation on policy that affected them, and more open political space was celebrated by the youth. The process was ‘youth friendly’ and encouraged young people to undertake nationwide research to feed into the various stages of policy planning and design. In response, research was conducted by youth representatives in all regions to input into the country’s revised youth policy; the subsequent report was presented to the government and disseminated among the population in the form of a compact disc (CD). One of the central concerns raised in the document was the general disrespect for youth concerns among the nation’s political elite. The irony of the outcome was that the recommendations put forward by the youth in their research were “not captured” in the final policy document,<sup>18</sup> causing deep resentment among researchers who felt “slighted” at their attempts to participate in the political process.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of training and education, there was little distinction made between the various age groups, although their needs were disparate. The new NYC hopes to address this by categorising ‘the youth’ into more useful groupings. Those

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16 Interviews with John Paul Bai and Keith Wright, country representative of UNDP, 17 August 2011.

17 Interview with Moisa Saidu, education coordinator, Amnesty International Sierra Leone, 10 August 2011.

18 Interviews with John Paul Bai and Charles Lahai.

19 Interview with Charles Lahai.

under 20 years are encouraged into school or other training establishments; 15–19-year-olds are therefore not targeted for specific training or employment interventions. Those aged 20–25 years old have been identified as the ‘core youth’ requiring technical, vocational and educational interventions to bring them up to the right skills levels. Those older than 25 years require enterprise development, self-employment initiatives and longer-term involvement in public works to live their lives successfully and support their families.

### **International partners**

International partners – including the UN and many of its agencies, the International Labour Office (ILO) and World Bank – have held conferences and workshops on youth-related issues, forming the Youth Employment Network (YEN) and delivering youth programming on education, skills training and access to credit. The United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), for example, introduced several projects for income generation, centred mainly on agro-industrial growth, while the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) launched a report on youth unemployment in the region, with several concrete recommendations (UNPBC, 2005). The ILO and World Bank also offered grants for youth projects. These included the ILO’s competitive grant scheme called the Youth to Youth Fund, which supported youth-led organisations and their employment initiatives, with rewards ranging from US\$5–US\$20 000 plus capacity-building support,<sup>20</sup> and the World Bank’s facility (involving a US\$35 000 grant in 2009) to support an ‘umbrella’ youth organisation in the country.<sup>21</sup>

There were concerns, however, that international initiatives such as these fell short of useful, sustainable and positive action on the ground. Many of their

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20 See the Youth Employment Network. Available from: <<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/yen/whatwedo/projects/y2y/sierraleone/main.htm>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

21 See the World Bank. Available from: <<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/SIERRALEONEEXTN/0,,contentMDK:22038687~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:367809,00.html?cid=3001>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

recommendations have yet to be put into place, with resources as well as political will being major problems. Locals complain that there is no accountability of international organisations and large amounts of money are wasted along the complicated chain of 'experts' involved in the process.<sup>22</sup> There is also little room for creative thinking in terms of local initiatives; the dialogue is based on preconceived ideas and Western notions of appropriate reform (Cubitt, 2011b). For example, in terms of skills, current graduates lack the specialised technical skills being sought by the larger companies,<sup>23</sup> and post-war training programmes did not equip people in the right skills for the emerging labour market.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the illiterate or semi-illiterate, low- and semi-skilled youth were unable to find stable, long-term employment (GoSL, 2005:175). Successful community-led grassroots projects, such as the UNDP's youth employment programmes, which were positively assessed by the participants themselves, had a short shelf life due to limited budgets and short-term strategies among planners (UNDP, 2011).

### Civil society

Support to civil society youth projects and to local youth groups was outstanding in its diversity and complexity. Political reform, codified in the PRSPs as democratic change, has created a more tolerant political environment. In turn, this has encouraged broad-based activity in all parts of the country.<sup>25</sup> A plethora of youth organisations have sprung up in response to the commitment by the national government to consolidate democracy by building a strong civil society,

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22 Interview with Charles Lahai.

23 Interview with a representative of ADDAX, Freetown, 6 July 2011.

24 Interviews with M.L. Johnson of the Employers' Federation, Freetown, on 2 August 2011, and with Kandeh Yillah of the Sierra Leone Labour Congress, on 30 June 2011.

25 Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers set out the national government commitments to good governance and economic reform as a prerequisite for support from international financial institutions (IFIs). Without the commitments made in these documents, and some progress made against them over time (especially in the economic domain), national governments struggle to attract confidence and investment from multinational companies, and loans and grants from bilateral and multinational partners.



and donor support has helped in this.<sup>26</sup> The UNDP's Engagement Project supported capacity building, and offered training to increase organisational strength among youth organisations.<sup>27</sup> Other initiatives have included Youth Action International's development and empowerment projects for women and girls; World Vision's youth mediation peace programme; the YMCA Sierra Leone's educational projects on HIV/AIDS, peacebuilding, human rights, livelihood support and skills training; the Independent Youth Forum's advocacy on all manner of youth issues, promoting the involvement of youth in the decision-making of the country; and Amnesty International's educational programming on human rights, using theatre and drama. Local civil society has been a central focus for the delivery of youth programming across the country. These activities have included literacy and advocacy, training on life skills, human rights, civil rights, health, finance, etc., and numerous empowerment projects – the central aim being to promote youth-led development in their communities. For example, the Safer Future Youth Development Programme has been involved in social and financial training, and the development of vocational skills providing training on solar energy systems and entrepreneurship to create employment opportunities in rural areas where lack of opportunities can push young people to migrate to the cities. It has successfully created self-employment for youth installing solar energy systems in schools.<sup>28</sup>

### **Economic integration**

The many domestic and international actors involved in post-conflict employment creation and income generation for the youth include public sector and governmental institutions – for example, the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) and the Sierra Leone Roads Authority (SLRA) – private sector employers, district councils, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil

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26 For further reading on international democracy promotion and civil society, see Carothers and Ottaway (2000).

27 Ibid.

28 Interview with Idriss Kamara, Safer Future Youth Development Programme, 10 August 2011.

society groups, and bilateral donors such as the World Bank and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit/German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) (Date-Bah and Regni, 2010:30). There is overlap between the functions of these various actors, and there are questions about their capacity to deliver, the quality of their outputs and, indeed, the relevance of some of the programming (Ibid.). In partnership with the government, international agencies have developed various initiatives to boost youth employment – including cash-for-work labour-intensive public works programmes such as waste management, road building and maintenance, which are short-term but useful for absorbing the energy of large numbers of youth while providing temporary relief from deep poverty. They also have the potential to develop into longer-term, more sustainable, programmes of work but, as yet, the government and its partners have failed to convert them successfully (Ibid.). The most substantial short-fix cash-for-work programme involved funding of US\$10 million from the World Bank, to be delivered through the NaCSA under its Youth Opportunities Programme. Other programme interventions include activities at district and community levels, mostly targeted at agricultural production or food processing, training and apprenticeship and labour-intensive infrastructure projects, but also micro-credits and micro-franchises. These have been small scale, however, and have failed to reach significant numbers of beneficiaries (Ibid.:15). Farming and industry have had little support in employment programming, and young people in the agricultural sector have been especially neglected.<sup>29</sup> Archaic and opaque land tenure systems offer contractual arrangements that are not enforceable by law and are rarely understood by young farmers (Peters, 2011:205). Some programming has been gender-sensitive but much of it has not, and there are concerns that gender blindness in job promotion may lead to deepening the feminisation of poverty, as many heads of households are women (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010:16).

There remain very strong feelings among the youth about the lack of employment opportunities created for them by government. On International Youth Day 2011, this text was forwarded to a prominent youth leader in the

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29 Interview with Mohammed Kanneh, programme coordinator, West African Youth Network, 10 August 2011.

country: “Tomorrow it is International Youth Day but I will wear black for my dissatisfaction and show there is nothing to celebrate.”<sup>30</sup> People feel that nothing concrete has happened regarding employment.<sup>31</sup> Although some new jobs have been created from foreign direct investment (FDI) and development projects in the country, local people are not skilled enough to take them up (ILO, 2010) – for example, London Mining, which recently restarted its iron ore activities in the north of the country, is recruiting skilled employees from Ghana.<sup>32</sup> The government and civil service do not have a programme for training new recruits and there are major issues around capacity constraints. Graduating students need to use their skills but get frustrated at the lack of opportunities available. And those who are educated at university are simply not captured in the job market<sup>33</sup> – they are emerging with the wrong skills or with skills that are inadequate or underdeveloped.<sup>34</sup> Illiteracy is also a huge problem, and exacerbates the difficulties experienced in skills training.

These realities mean that young people have involved themselves in autonomous economic integration – and the most successful of these local enterprises is the Okada Riders Association. Formed as an economic venture among the youth – many of whom are former combatants – with no outside interference or support, okada (motorbike) riders provide a valuable service to the community by transporting people to and from their place of work, both in the cities and across the countryside. Sierra Leone has a limited and poorly maintained road infrastructure and the cities, especially Freetown, are notorious for their congestion. In the absence of a good public transport system, okada riders offer a cheap way to get about town for local people – especially market women, who make up the majority of their customer base (Peters, 2007). This local enterprise is not only solving the local transport problem but is also addressing the dire underemployment situation among the youth. Okada riders have gained some

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30 Interview with Charles Lahai.

31 Interview with John Paul Bai.

32 BBC report, 21 January 2011. Available from: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12249747>> [Accessed on 29 September 2011].

33 Interview with John Paul Bai.

34 Interview with M.L. Johnson.

respect among the community, and are able to support their own families; the enterprise has created over 150 000 jobs and is the biggest single employer outside agriculture, and jobs have also been created down the value chain.<sup>35</sup>

This successful local initiative has not been without its challenges. Riders cannot always afford to buy the bikes themselves, and this makes their business vulnerable to elite capture (see Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). There have also been some restrictions put on the operation of okadas in Freetown, due to high numbers of accidents. Police clampdowns have resulted in hundreds of bikes being impounded and riders arrested.<sup>36</sup> The lack of regulation, including the licensing and insurance of okadas and their riders, has prompted calls for policy in this area so that the industry can be regulated and safety improved.<sup>37</sup>

Young people get involved in other informal activities such as cash-for-work projects or they set up their own small businesses. They are key players in petty trading, subsistence agriculture, cross-border trade, vehicle repairs, car washing, hairdressing and tailoring (mostly women), battery charging and the sale of mobile phone top-ups. Some young people also work in the commercial sex industry, and a growing number are involved in the production of music (Ismail et al., 2009:56-7). Music is easy to access and is becoming more professional, offering good opportunities for young people to make a living and, at the same time, express their concerns in a peaceful way (Wai, 2008:57). There is also tremendous growth in the entertainment sector, which has created a variety of income and livelihood opportunities for young people, both male and female, across the value chain – in production, sound engineering, promotion, directing, video and CD production, sales and marketing.<sup>38</sup>

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35 Interviews with Keith Wright and Youth Minister Anthony Koroma.

36 BBC World Service (2010) Network *Africa Okada Clampdown*[Internet], 2 September 2010. Available from: <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/09/100902\\_sierraleone\\_motorcycles.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/09/100902_sierraleone_motorcycles.shtml)> [Accessed 5 October 2011].

37 Interview with John Paul Bai.

38 Interview with Youth Minister Anthony Koroma.

## Political integration

The youth of Sierra Leone are very keen to express themselves through the formal political process, and democratisation has afforded them the opportunity for meaningful participation in the governance of their country (Ismail et al., 2009:10). The TRC called for at least 10% of all political party candidates in elections to be drawn from the youth, to increase their representation in parliament (TRC, 2004: Volume 2, Chapter 3, Recommendations, paragraph 313), and government now supports youth political parties, councillors and ward committees – these are secure spaces for expression and a great stride forward from the past. Decentralisation has allowed youth candidates to be elected local councillors, for example, which has enabled them to challenge the traditional authority of chiefs. Tensions do remain, however, as no-one is quite sure “who is on top of who” in terms of legitimate authority at local level – and this is especially so between the new youth councillors and members of parliament.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the space created in local councils for youth voices is not working well in terms of positive outcomes.<sup>40</sup>

Multiparty politics has created ethnic tensions around the political process, but the youth have identified this challenge by creating their own All Political Party Youth Association. Women have also formed an All Party Association. In Sierra Leone, where you come from determines which political party you support: the north of the country is generally associated with the current government, the All Peoples’ Congress (APC); and the south and east of the country is generally associated with the Sierra Leone Peoples’ Party (SLPP). These ethnic differences now pose a new threat to political stability, because the politicisation of ethnicity has emerged in sharp relief with the advent of multiparty politics (Cubitt, 2011b).<sup>41</sup> Although ethnicity does not usually cause trouble at youth level, during political events tensions rise because ethnicity is used as a political weapon.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Interview with Charles Lahai.

40 Interview with John Paul Bai.

41 Interview with Charles Lahai.

42 Interview with John Paul Bai.

The Mano River Union Youth Parliament is run by young people from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea (countries that border the Mano River, a region prone to outbreaks of violence) to discuss issues of national interest which affect them. The parliament is based on a constituency system, and representatives are heard at central government level. So far, its policy proposals have been rejected by the Sierra Leone government and participation is described as “a shambles”; politicians are accused of using the youth as ‘window dressing’ and do not include them in the design stage of policy making.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, national politicians try to divide the youth parliament along the same lines as national politics, bribing young people with promises of jobs or educational scholarships.<sup>44</sup> Nothing has changed dramatically in the cynical and negative view of young people, despite strong lobbying against it,<sup>45</sup> and the youth remain very dissatisfied with the political leadership.<sup>46</sup>

### **Social and cultural change**

To improve the problematic relationship between generations in Sierra Leone, literacy circles have been set up to promote better dialogue and improved understanding. Headed by chiefs, the circles provide community-level platforms for the different generations to interact in an informal way, and projects appear to be bearing fruit. These include a “strategic engagement with elders and young people” project, supported by international partners, which focuses on bringing about social attitudinal change. Another project, spearheaded by Amnesty International, educates young people for leadership roles, emphasising the point that they do not have to be an elder to be a leader.<sup>47</sup> Traditional issues are taken very seriously in programming, and social drama is playing a central role in educating people on better relations between the generations.

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43 Interview with Moisa Saidu.

44 Ibid.

45 Interview with Mohammed Kanneh, programme coordinator, West African Youth Network, 10 August 2011.

46 Interview with Charles Lahai.

47 Interview with Moisa Saidu.

A new education policy in 1995 officially recognised the value of adult and non-formal education and a plan of action for 1996–2006 aimed to extend the reach of education to provide opportunities for youth and adults. The changes were formalised in the country's Education Act of 2004, which provides the legal basis for the provision of free adult education and literacy. Resources remain scarce, however, and there are issues around teacher training, the quality of learning and teaching materials, and the accreditation of providers and teachers. Several programmes, including adult literacy and vocational training, have been implemented across all regions – but most of the projects have been small-scale (UNESCO, 2008).

Basic literacy for girls has been targeted, and those in the northern and eastern areas have been deliberately sponsored for basic education because they have the lowest literacy rates in the country. A local civil society organisation (CSO), the Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organisation, prioritises girls and women in its programming, and community literacy projects are its central focus. Some donors – the Barings Foundation in the UK, for example – have provided programming for young mothers, but these have generally been unsustainable. Although there is plenty of rhetoric around gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity in youth programming, good evidence is yet to materialise among many of the activities being implemented (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). The 50/50 approach to participation, recommended by the TRC, is proving a great challenge as cultural practices, beliefs and traditions prevent girls and young women from taking up the opportunities that are offered to them.<sup>48</sup> DDR operations were conducted to the “near exclusion of women and girl” former combatants, but adolescent women and girls are sometimes leaders of violent protests and their exclusion can lead to crime and prostitution (Mazurana and Carlson, 2004). Local women's organisations helped to reintegrate young mothers after the war by providing foster care services for their children so that the young women themselves could go to school or skills training, and both UNICEF and USAID offered projects for their reintegration (Ibid.). It must be remembered that this group of marginalised young people, many with traumatic war histories, are the mothers of the next generation of youth. Women have played a significant but

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48 Interview with Youth Minister Anthony Koroma, 7 October 2011.

unacknowledged role in the reintegration of former fighters, filling many gaps in official programmes. Female fighters who were children when recruited by rebel or government forces have been supported by women who have opened their homes, sharing resources, skills and advice (Ibid.).

A small number of youth programmes are focused on the arts, allowing people to express themselves through video, radio, drama or music. WeOwnTV, for example, continues to capitalise on young peoples' need for honest self-expression and encourages local youth to make their own documentaries and films, supported by free media training programmes.<sup>49</sup> Sport is also a most useful and convenient vehicle for marshalling youth energy, promoting peaceful dialogue and disseminating peaceful messages.<sup>50</sup> Parliamentarians have been persuaded to take part in friendly football matches against civil society representatives, and these have been successful in bridging some of the gaps between politicians and the youth.<sup>51</sup>

Very few post-conflict activities have been targeted at those with disabilities. The notable exception was a programme under the YES by Christian Aid for Under-Assisted Societies Everywhere, which focused on youth with mobility-related disabilities – a legacy of the war – who needed physical and functional rehabilitation to build their capacities for self-reliance (UNDP, 2010). This was an isolated project among a host of initiatives for post-war support to young people. It is hoped that the Disability Act, ratified by the government in 2011, will encourage affirmative action to overcome obstacles and barriers, including access to public facilities, transport, health and justice for the disabled.<sup>52</sup>

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49 Youth Media Reporter (2011) This is our generation: Sierra Leonean youth views through film. *Youth Media Reporter* [Internet]. 1 February. Available from: <[http://www.youthmediareporter.org/2011/02/this\\_is\\_our\\_generation\\_sierra.html](http://www.youthmediareporter.org/2011/02/this_is_our_generation_sierra.html)> [Accessed 6 October 2011].

50 Interview with Alu Sesay, Tangible Academic Youth Forum, 4 August 2011.

51 Interviews with Alu Sesay and Musa Soko.

52 According to UNIPSIL. Available from: <<http://unipsil.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=9611&ctl=Details&mid=12590&ItemID=11563&language=en-US>> [Accessed 3 April 2012].



## **Analysis of the impact of post-war activities**

Given the significant focus on youth-based development, which has been manifest in Sierra Leone since the end of the war, it is important to analyse these initiatives in the broader context vis-à-vis the central concerns of the youth themselves: jobs, skills, education, opportunities and respect for them from authorities. What went wrong in the development and implementation of youth programming that made the majority of the youth populace so dissatisfied with the outcome, and how has the broader context of post-conflict reconstruction constrained more positive results?

### **Economic restructuring**

All initiatives for post-conflict job creation have taken place within the framework of economic liberalisation, promoted by the international financial institutions (IFIs) as a condition for support after war. This has been done on the grounds that trade liberalisation, export-oriented growth and enlargement of the private sector will lead to economic stability, growth, jobs and a reduction in poverty (IDA and World Bank, 2005). Yet it is the case that economic growth is invariably delinked to job creation in much of the developing world (Nkurunziza, 2007). Due to the structure of the Sierra Leone economy – based mostly on the export of primary commodities – economic growth has not been pro-employment (Cubitt, 2011a).<sup>53</sup> As the state budget contracts under liberalism, jobs are lost in the public sector; at the same time, the removal of trade barriers floods local markets with cheap imported goods, reducing the demand from local small-scale producers. This impedes economic activity in the local informal and small-medium enterprise economies, reducing opportunities for youth (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010:24). The business-friendly government has promoted the expansion of FDI, but this remains volatile and sensitive to the local political situation (ILO, 2010). In any event, FDI is primarily invested in resource extraction – iron ore, diamonds and, more recently, oil – and the cultivation of agricultural products such as palm oil or sugar cane to produce

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53 Interview with Keith Wright.

bio-fuels. Although these deals promised new jobs, they have produced very little in the way of quality employment, due to the high standards of education or skills required by employers (ILO, 2010). At the same time, 'land grabs' have ignited tensions across the countryside, because concessions to outside interests through outdated land tenure systems have benefited traditional authorities (such as chiefs) but marginalised low-caste labour and grassroots initiatives (ILO, 2010; Peters and Richards, 2011). For example, arrests were made following protests over land acquired for palm oil production in Pujehun district; violent incidents, which culminated in one fatality and several hospitalisations at the hands of the police, took place in Tonkolili district over wages and conditions in the iron ore sector; and farmers rallied in the capital, Freetown, to protest at the gross imbalance of power between rural communities and powerful foreign investors.<sup>54</sup> But rising tensions over large-scale agribusiness in the countryside and national protests over the power of investors, poor working conditions, low wages and land grabs, have met with resistance and denial from government.<sup>55</sup> Large swathes of prime agricultural land have been acquired by investors, robbing many local farmers of their livelihoods when, at the same time, the country's youth have been encouraged to return to the countryside to pursue agricultural activities. It is in this contradictory and challenging context that youth employment programmes have tried to gain traction; a situation that highlights the responsibility of international partners to get the right structures in place in their post-conflict statebuilding endeavours (Cubitt, 2012).

A single comprehensive and coherent employment creation programme does not exist in Sierra Leone (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010), and the markets themselves have not come up with the promised opportunities that liberal intervention claims to produce. Most jobs created since the war have been 'artificial' in nature (created by development agencies, not local or international markets) – or they

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54 See Reuters News Agency, available from: <[www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)>, and The Guardian Global Development, available from: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/apr/11/sierra-leone-local-resistance-land-deals>> [Accessed 28 April 2012].

55 The Guardian (2012) Sierra Leone: local resistance grows as investors snap up land. *The Guardian: Global Development* [Internet], 11 April. Available from: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/poverty-matters/2012/apr/11/sierra-leone-local-resistance-land-deals/print>> [Accessed 25 April 2012].

have been short-term, small-scale, half-hearted and unsustainable. The failure of the economy to deliver jobs along with growth has meant a continuum of 'sticking plaster' economics – when government and development agencies intervene with funding and ad hoc strategies for quick-win projects rather than the local market generating its own demand for labour, which is meaningful and sustainable. There is virtually no access to micro-credit for youth initiatives, which undermines skills training in entrepreneurship. University graduates who wish to start small or medium-sized enterprises, or youth already engaged in business in the informal sector, find it nigh impossible to secure loans from commercial banks or micro-credit organisations, which consider them high risk. Young people have little knowledge of credit systems, and without bank accounts are not creditworthy (Ismail et al., 2009:48). In the absence of public works programmes or support for self-employment and entrepreneurship, and the failure of liberalisation to create jobs, the youth of Sierra Leone are expected to rely once again on the ingenuity of aid agencies to fill the gap. In reality, as we shall see, young people are creating their own opportunities.

The youth wanted good skills training and improved education to increase their chances of employment, but not enough thought was given to skills training and whether it would be relevant for the demands of the post-conflict labour market. Skills training in soap production, for example, did not take into account that local production could not compete with foreign imports, and graduates leaving university with 'soft skills' – such as human resource management, accountancy and peace studies – are not equipped for employment in the extractive industries, which require technical competencies.<sup>56</sup> The provision of adult education for youth who had missed out during the war was desperately weak, and exacerbated by overcrowding and poor infrastructure, and the meagre remuneration and low morale of teaching staff (Ismail et al., 2009:47). Frustrations were compounded by the ancillary fees charged by some schools and teaching staff when education was supposed to be free. Low educational standards made youth vulnerable to exploitation, removing their freedom to make independent and considered choices.

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56 Interview with M.L. Johnson and ADDAX representative.

## Political reform

All initiatives for political engagement have taken place within the framework of democratisation under a multiparty system, and have relied on the commitment of politicians to abide by the rules of the game. As noted earlier, multiparty politics in Sierra Leone is based on ethnic (regional) differences rather than ideological statements, and these cleavages have become more visible and more destructive since the reintroduction of multipartism after the war (Cubitt, 2011b). Ethnic differences have been exploited by politicians seeking to advance their own interests – yet ethnicity does not cause problems among the youth in everyday life.<sup>57</sup> The Okada Riders Association, for example, unites around class not ethnic differences (Peters, 2007). Whilst a wealth of programming and policy making initiatives and activities, and immeasurable resources, have been directed towards the reintegration of youth into peaceful society, politicians have been mobilising young, predominantly urban, men for election campaign ‘security services’ and general crowd control. The majority of those mobilised are former combatants; many recruited through still-active chains of command via high and mid-level commanders with army, government militia and rebel backgrounds (Utas, 2010). This ‘spoiling’ feeds off the vulnerability of the youth and is symptomatic of the country’s contemporary context and nature of governance (Ismail et al., 2009:11). In the absence of peaceful alternatives, political violence can be a way for youth to ‘engage’ and ‘participate’; sometimes “violence becomes a reality for their survival”.<sup>58</sup> It is within this context of toxic political culture and divisive political structures that youth programming for participation and empowerment has taken place.

The All Political Parties Youth Association has been spearheaded by the youth in an effort to get away from the imagery of violence and political intolerance, and to ease political tensions. This is an admirable attempt to stop the democratic process being undermined by spoilers, who manipulate vulnerable people for their own ends. Youth exclusion and vulnerability does not necessarily lead to violent outcomes, when young people channel their energies into

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57 Interview with John Paul Bai.

58 Interview with Musa Ansumana Soko.

collaborative and productive activities (Ismail et al., 2009:11). Despite post-war democratisation where good space has opened up for youth participation, the money-driven, corrupt, manipulative nature of politics and the socio-economic plight of the youth has meant their voice is weak and ineffective, and they are insignificant in the decision-making process (Ismail et al., 2009:38).

### **Organisation of programming**

There have been problems with synergy, overlap and conflicting programmes among donors and government agencies (Date-Bah and Regmi, 2010). In the absence of coherent local strategies for youth development, international partners face difficult challenges in terms of focusing their support. People seem obsessed by processes at the expense of outcomes, however, and too much time and resources are absorbed in the coordination of disparate policies, strategies, plans and laws (Ibid.:22). There are estimates that around 1 800 local projects are geared towards youth employment or youth empowerment, but sustainable sources of project funding are a perennial challenge and coherence is lacking. Most state-led initiatives have minimal impact – a prime example being the suspension of the YES on the eve of the 2007 elections, on account of inadequate funding by donor governments and agencies (Ismail et al., 2009:44). Community-led projects are considered high risk by donors, but their own poor use of funds – or slow use of funds – has been identified as more of a hindrance to the successful outcome of local initiatives than the activities of some beneficiaries themselves.<sup>59</sup> In a study by the UNDP, the advantages and disadvantages of community versus donor empowerment approaches have been analysed. Conclusions were drawn that the disadvantages of the community approach were all faced by their development partners, not the local beneficiaries themselves (UNDP, 2011).

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59 Interview with Keith Wright.

### **Autonomous responses for youth engagement**

As national government and its partners have struggled to manage their resources efficiently, the youth of Sierra Leone have been busy developing their own initiatives for job creation – the successful membership-based Okada Riders Association being just one of them. Other autonomous youth initiatives have included the provision of security services in areas of the countryside where the national police are rarely seen and where there is a security gap. Some youth have organised themselves as ‘guardians of security’, working as private guards for small diamond operators, or policing local communities after dark to tackle fights and other disturbances (Baker, 2005:382). The majority of youth are committed to security and development, not violence and conflict. In the Freetown area, some youth work voluntarily to police the poorest settlements and, although there are mixed feelings among the local community about this practice, on balance their genuine commitment to the job has been acknowledged (Baker, 2005). This autonomous job creation, like the okada project, provides a peaceful substitute to the excitement of war, it gives youth self-respect and a sense of purpose (see Peters, 2007) and, because it is grassroots, a sense of ownership. Solidarity through autonomous youth initiatives is a powerful tool when negotiating with government; horizontal collective action through strikes and lobbying (the Okada Rider’s Association hires a commercial lawyer to fight its cases) brings dividends for young people (Ibid.). Those in the provinces have formed community-based youth groups as sources of support, social control, socialisation, and for engagement with state and society. In the Makeni, Kenema and Kono districts, “youth groups are actively involved in peer education, self-advocacy, peace education, community development and recreational competitions, especially football leagues. Some of these groups embark on fundraising and advocacy campaigns to pay school fees or get placements in vocational training centres for their members” (Ismail et al., 2009:53). Shortly after the end of the war, in trying to overcome the difficult issue of access to land, young entrepreneurs – many of them former combatants, both men and women – negotiated a deal on wasteland in Tongo from a new chief who was youth-friendly. Tongo is a diamond mining town in the east of Sierra Leone, and the land negotiated was cratered and ‘mined out’ and of little

use to the chief or community. With some support from partners,<sup>60</sup> this small group of agriculturalists were successful in reclaiming former wasteland back to agricultural land. However, before the land could yield good harvests for the young farmers themselves, the land contract came to an end and it was the community that reaped the rewards of their labour (Peters, 2011:206).

Wartime displacement created a new sense of self-reliance among people of all ages which has, over time, reduced the levels of deference afforded chiefs and elders by the youth (Fanthorpe and Maconachie, 2010). People are doing things for themselves through craft organisations and trade unionism, especially in provincial towns (Peters, 2006), and have taken advantage of local opportunities the post-war environment presented for innovative and independent entrepreneurship. Labour cooperatives and social clubs, formed by the youth themselves, have helped a slow return to agriculture.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Post-war programming for youth in Sierra Leone has taken place against a backdrop of unaccommodating institutional structures and attitudes, and has failed to address the main concerns – jobs, training and education, and an effective and respected voice in government. Explanations for these failures include the fragility and economic plight of the state, which has been overburdened with post-war demands from both local and international communities; the restructuring of the economy towards export-oriented growth, which has marginalised local markets and their potential for job creation and therefore constrained local development; multiparty politics, which has tapped into regional differences and been exploited by politicians who now mobilised support along ethnic lines; the lack of long-term, coordinated and accurately targeted commitment by international partners in the programming process and, finally, the continued pervasiveness of deep-rooted toxic political practices, cultural norms and stigma against youth, including lack of access to

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60 Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ).

land. It is with these factors in mind that recommendations for change include the following.

In terms of economic and political reforms, pressure needs to be put on global actors to rethink their methodology in post-conflict reconstruction programming and the way they visualise development. It is essential to adopt a more creative and locally based focus for the design of appropriate institutional structures, which can better support the development and peacebuilding plans of youth. For example, job creation schemes struggle to gain traction because there is such a weak local market to support them. What is needed is a more inward-facing economy to kick-start the local markets and create a better supporting structure for sustainable employment – but this sort of change can only come from the international institutions themselves that dictate the politico-economic shape of fragile states as they emerge from war. Serious reflection needs to take place on the wisdom of ‘too much’ FDI when local communities are losing out and land grabs are igniting tensions, and alternative local programming that has worked well for small-scale needs to be broadened, especially at community level.

In terms of political reform, multipartism has not been the best model of democracy to unite post-war Sierra Leone, as it has created a tinderbox of ethnic tension from hitherto (mostly) trouble-free regional relations. This divisiveness does nothing to help the country’s post-war development and consolidation as a nation, and pressure needs to be put on political elites to ease the tensions and remove ethnicity from politics. The youth need support in their excellent efforts to cement their solidarity and resist pressure from politicians. Supporting their capacity in this regard and improving inter-ethnic education will help ensure more peaceful elections. Education and awareness projects that focus on the potential power of new legislation – human rights, disability, employment and gender parity bills, for example – will help youth take advantage of legal advances and improve their influence and efficacy at national level, so that they can help themselves rather than rely on external interventions.

It cannot be stressed strongly enough how important relevant and high-quality skills training is for youth to take advantage of the economic opportunities that post-conflict development provides. In-depth research into local markets and



the needs of both foreign and local investors will help the design of appropriate programming. International support to educational and technology institutes, in the form of long-term teaching and training expertise, as well as equipment and structures, is paramount to increase levels of human capital and provide the right skills for the local job market. Standards of and access to education, especially for girls, need to be vastly improved, and quality control must be an essential component of the process. Again, commitment by partners to provide long-term and sustainable support through the provision of qualified, high-calibre professionals to support local teaching staff is paramount. A coherent strategy and long-term support for youth entrepreneurship through loans and relevant business training may help people to understand better and take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

Pressure needs to be put on government to push through the land reform act to help support sustainable youth livelihoods in the countryside and protect them from traditional or customary laws. Mechanisms need to be developed to prioritise access to land for young people and build upon current agricultural farm projects, by increasing the amount of government-owned land available to them. The inauguration of the country's new National Youth Commission is a unique opportunity for partners to support and guide coherence in national policy across all ministries, so that all available resources can be marshalled in a single plan and not wasted along the various chains of authority and implementing bodies. There is scope for more research on these issues, especially on the links between youth programming and economic growth, FDI and job creation, the international community and economic restructuring, and the role of local and regional markets for job creation.

This chapter has argued that the perception of youth as a threat to future peace and stability is false, because the greatest majority of youth are involved in peaceful struggles for empowerment, for opportunities and education, for respect and for prosperity. The most significant threat to security comes from the political elite, who control a small minority of them. Their exploitation of youth vulnerability means that hard-won peace remains uneasy and balanced on the whims and ambitions of spoilers to the process. The most encouraging signs of purposeful and successful youth engagement have emerged from

initiatives developed independently by the youth themselves. They are a bountiful resource for progressive change in their own right; as activists, heads of households, creative entrepreneurs and peacebuilders. It is, therefore, the role of the international community to create the environment that can help them achieve their own peaceful ambitions.

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# The danger of marginalisation: An analysis of Kenyan youth and their integration into political, socio-economic life<sup>1</sup>

*Daniel Forti and Grace Maina*

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## Introduction

Conflicts between Kenya's major ethnic blocs have dominated the country's post-independence era. Society's elites have repeatedly created and exploited ethnic tensions between communities to incite violent outbreaks, aimed at achieving political and economic gains. The ethno-political framework dictating Kenyan political life is symptomatic of key issues that continue to undermine Kenya's democracy and development: land grievances, weak government institutions, growing income inequalities, and negative ethnic relations – all of which are evident in political practice. The violent aftermath of Kenya's 2007 general elections indicates the reality that Kenya's societal foundation must be improved if the country is to enjoy sustainable peace.

Following the announcement of the election results on 30 December 2007, violent clashes broke out across various parts of the country. Some argue that the violence – which resulted in 1 220 deaths, 3 600 injuries and 300 000 internally displaced people (IDPs) – was in revolt to the announced election results, which declared the incumbent President Mwai Kibaki of the Party of National Unity (PNU) the winner over the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) candidate,

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1 Authors thank all interviewed for their contribution to this chapter.



Raila Odinga (OCHR, 2008). A government of national unity (GNU), which included members from the two disputing political parties, was formed to resolve the political crisis: its landmark achievement was the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution, a key instrument for decentralising power from the Presidency and establishing widespread checks and balances throughout the government.

When speaking of Kenya's political landscape, it is imperative to address its largest demographic unit and political constituency: the youth. Since the term 'youth' is a generic expression embodying a diverse, dynamic and fluid constituency of people, different segments of Kenya invariably offer contending interpretations of both its practical definition and the demographic's place in society. The 2010 Kenyan Constitution defines any individual between 18 and 35 years in age as youth,<sup>2</sup> while many of the country's different youth development programmes identify youth as individuals between 15 and 35 years of age. Approximately 74% of the Kenyan population is under 34 years old; of these, 64% are under the age of 25 years (*The Economist*, 2010; Population Reference Bureau, 2011). In addition, youth make up 64% of the nation's total unemployed population (Saunders School of Business, 2009). Unlike the older generations, who previously benefited from ethnic favouritism and corruption, the youth have largely lived in poor conditions throughout the country. In the 2007 elections, over 3.7 million youths voted, making them a formidable political constituency (ICG, 2008). They were also primarily responsible for the physical fighting and humanitarian crisis during the post-election period. Many young people formed ethnically centred armed gangs that conducted ethnically motivated violent raids throughout the country. Some of these youth groupings existed prior to the elections, but the constant blending of politics and ethnicity continued to reinforce the place of such groups within Kenyan society. Of specific interest to this chapter is the Mungiki sect, which Atieno refers to as the Neo-Mau Mau group (Atieno, 2007). In defining the Mungiki, Ruteere (2008) summarises the group into four main interpretations: the Mungiki as a religio-cultural movement; the Mungiki as a local manifestation of anti-globalisation forces; the Mungiki as a criminal gang and vigilante; and finally the Mungiki as a political organisation. This chapter analyses the Mungiki as an illustration of

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2 For the purposes of this paper, youth will be defined as per Kenya's constitutional definition of 18–35 years.

Kenya's failure to engage its youth constituency successfully and its damaging impact on the country's trajectory towards peace.

It is imperative to state here that as the post-election violence cost Kenya's economy over US\$1 billion, the youth are suffering disproportionately from the effects of economic loss and the slow pace of Kenya's recovery (Obulutsa, 2008). In anticipation of the next election, this constituency must be thoroughly engaged and involved in the task and dividends of political, economic and social life. Failure to do so will likely result in violent patterns during and beyond elections. The youth constituency is, therefore, an integral determinant of the country's stability following the 2012 elections.

This work will seek to interrogate and analyse the place of the youth in the Kenyan state. Taking into account the massive numbers of young people and the reality of the poverty that characterises most of Kenya, the youth's role within Kenya must not be understated. An analysis of the youth's place in society must also be juxtaposed with an assessment of the Kenyan state's ability to guarantee security for this constituency. The social contract prescribes a state in which the sovereign avails security in the sense of both physical security and the opportunity to survive. In instances where the state is unable to fulfil and to ensure these forms of security, who then is responsible? The Kenyan community is a critical illustration of this argument, where the state is incapable of fully executing its obligation to the social contract agreement with its citizenry. This chapter will first discuss Kenya's political history in a bid to contextualise the place and practice of the state today. The chapter will then address the question of youth and what that means in Kenyan society, as well as the challenges that continue to undermine the active and inclusive participation of the youth in Kenya's political and social realms. By examining some of the remedies that the government has applied to address youth concerns, we illustrate the dangers of ignoring and marginalising this constituency within the context of a state with weak societal institutions and infrastructure. This is highlighted by a case study of Mungiki life and political conduct. The chapter concludes by making recommendations as to how the youth population should be fully engaged within Kenyan society, and how their political marginalisation can be countered to secure peace. Our work rests on the presumption that in instances of violent

conflict, the youth are often assimilated as instruments of war, and that to transform previously war-torn societies effectively there is an urgent need to absorb the youth meaningfully to curtail exploitative forces that seek power through violence.

## **An overview of Kenya's political history and youth involvement**

The forms of conflict that have been experienced in Kenya can be categorised as non-state or intrastate conflict – where neither party is connected to the government – or one-sided violence – where either the government or an organised group has used violence against a civilian group (UCDP, 2010). While Kenya's conflicts appear to revolve solely around ethnic tensions and rivalries, antagonisms also stem from intergenerational tensions between youth and elders. The relationship between these generations has often been marked by one generation using the next to further their stay in politics – as politically eligible youth, widely touted as 'Young Turks', were rendered powerless and kept in the service of their respective elders. For long periods of time, the youth have constituted a powerless counter-public to the hegemony of the elders who dominated the state, political parties and other instruments of power. The youth are often regarded as a fundamental group to engage in politics, but as masses used to reaffirm the desired ends of the political elite instead of equal members with active participation in leadership positions and policy decisions. In understanding the different conflicts and trends that continue to mar the Kenyan community, the youth and their role in political violence, it is important to note the major grievances that led to conflict within the Kenyan society.

### **Politicisation of ethnicity**

A fundamental root of conflict in Kenya is the negative manipulation of ethnicity. Politicians consistently invoke and manipulate tribal identity so as to mobilise power around themselves. The country's government has always represented an elite club of businessmen and politicians in which the president surrounds himself with kinsmen from different ethnic communities so as to generate the

highest standing for their respective blocs. As a result, millions of ‘non-elite’ Kenyans continue to be marginalised and excluded from the political machinery on the basis of not only ethnicity but also class. While Kenyans define themselves in terms of national identity and not ethnic identity, multiple quantitative studies have proven that ethnicity plays an important role in determining how the country votes for its political officials (Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008; Rheault and Tortora, 2008; Kimenyi and Romero, 2008; Dercon and Romero, 2010; Ruteere, 2008). A national identity has yet to be achieved and thus many citizens will often see themselves within the tribal context before they regard themselves as Kenyans.

### **Land grievances**

Land has been a foundational point of dispute in Kenya, as contestation over land has been prevalent both at the local and national level. The distribution of land since independence has been marked with excessive politicisation. Whilst many analyse the land conflict as one of ethnicity, it has become apparent that land has ultimately resided in the hands of a few ruling elites. Land wars in Rift Valley Province date back to the country’s immediate post-colonial history, where groups of the Kikuyu community, as well as the landless Mau Mau warriors, competed for territory owned by major corporations. Over the years, the Kikuyu community has grown in numbers and in wealth in Rift Valley Province, leading to one of the greatest disputes between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities (UKAid, 2010). Over the years, Kenyan politicians have manipulated ethnic identities, and this has further exacerbated competition for land and fuelled the violent methodology to ensure the acquisition of land. Following the 1992 tribal clashes and the post-election violence in 2008, many from the Kikuyu community were displaced from their farms in Rift Valley Province. The resettlement of thousands of IDPs and the illegal occupation of land by other communities continues to be a challenge that can easily escalate into more violence.

## **Economic inequalities**

Kenya was placed 128<sup>th</sup> out of 169 countries with respect to the Income Gini Coefficient in 2010.<sup>3</sup> The country's income inequality is only exacerbated by the rampant corruption and elite excesses that continue to see the ruling elite get wealthier. Donald Kaberuka, current president of the African Development Bank, told the *Financial Times* that the inequality is a chief source of Kenya's problems, saying: "Forty per cent of Kenya's people live in urban areas and many of them in slums. This is where this volatility arising from inequalities comes from" (Hanson, 2008). It is these continued inequalities that facilitate the rise of criminal gangs. Unemployment, especially among the urban youth, remains alarmingly high and the benefits from President Kibaki's macro-economic policies have only accrued to a select group of elites. Hundreds of thousands of Kenyans remain displaced from the 2007 conflict, and land in many parts of the country continues to be heavily contested by different stakeholders. Unless corrected, these inequalities will continue to grow in adversity to peace.

## **Weak government institutions**

As the previous Kenyan Constitution was subject to constant criticism for the manner in which it vested excessive power within the executive, it is further contended that the weakness of Kenyan institutions have also contributed to conflict. Weak institutions preclude checks and balances on executive power. The new constitution, however, corrects many of these inadequacies by reinforcing such institutions, specifically a stronger and transparent judiciary and a powerful legislature. The significant power previously vested in the executive meant that all elections were a zero-sum game, increasing the odds that the election results would devolve into violence. The current GNU has largely been conscious and active in resolving some of the structural issues that have plagued

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3 Gini coefficient of inequality: This is the most commonly used measure of inequality. The coefficient varies between 0, which reflects complete equality, and 1, which indicates complete inequality (one person has all the income or consumption, all others have none). World Bank. (2011) Available from: <<http://go.worldbank.org/3SLYUTVY00>> [Accessed 4 July 2011].

Kenyan society, by trying to decentralise power. The new constitution embodies the changes the people want, but in and of itself is only a document: it must be implemented properly if it is to address this vital cause of conflicts. Despite a marked improvement there nonetheless remains a crisis of confidence in the government's youth policies.

## Elections

Elections in Kenya are truly contentious events, as politicians play one tribe against another to expand and protect their political space. The zero-sum framework of this democracy continues to challenge a country that is so ethnically divided. Questions of vote manipulation and electoral fraud dominate the electoral dialogue. The political character of ruling elites and the free use of hate speech are ever-present sparks for violence during electoral periods. Whilst there has been fundamental progress in dealing with these issues through the new constitution and improved judicial functions, it is of concern that habits might not so easily be relearned without incentives. The International Criminal Court's (ICC) prosecution of the 'Ocampo Six'<sup>4</sup> sent the message that the law can still hold individuals responsible for their efforts to canvass and incite others to violence.

## The challenges facing youth

In today's Kenya, the massive size of the youth cohort consistently demands more resources to meet their social and economic needs, to enable their survival and reasonable livelihood (Muthee, 2010). There is empirical evidence that investing

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4 On 15 December 2010, the International Criminal Court's (ICC) chief prosecutor, Luis Moreno Ocampo, laid out charges against six prominent Kenyans who were allegedly responsible for planning and inciting the violence following the country's 2007 elections. The six accused are: Uhuru Kenyatta (former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister), William Ruto (former Agriculture and Higher Education Minister), Francis Muthaura (former Cabinet Secretary and head of Civil Service), Hussein Ali (former police chief), Henry Kosgey (former Industrialisation Minister and Chairman of the ODM) and Joshua Sang (radio producer of Kass FM, a Kalenjin-language station).

in the youth is beneficial to society as a whole (Knowles and Behrman, 2003 as cited in UNFPA, 2005) as their energy, creativity and networking capacity make them a significant resource for contributing to national development. Youth need an environment in which they can foster their talents and creativity to improve their security and well-being directly. It is imperative that the government remains cognisant of the expanding youth population, and it should endeavour to take advantage of this demographic dividend. Unemployed youth are an inactive and insecure demographic that can be mobilised for violence, raising the country's chances of relapsing into civil conflict. When more than 40% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 29, the country is 2.3 times more likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict compared with countries with smaller youth populations (Cincotta et al., 2003).

Kenya's youth population has grown exponentially over the years, with those under 30 years old constituting over 70% of the country's population. This youth population makes up 60% of the total labour force, but many of these young people remain unemployed and have not been absorbed into the market. To further complicate the growing challenge of this constituency, more than 75% of those with HIV/AIDS are in the 20–45 year age bracket (Republic of Kenya, 2007). Coupled with this health challenge are different complexities that continue to shadow youth life in Kenya. This section delves into some of those social, political and economic challenges, which are as follows:

### **Generational relationship complexity**

The intergenerational relationship between youth and their elders is complex at best. Although a number of tensions underline this conflict, it is suggested that modernisation is perhaps the most critical factor. In Kenya, it is evident that modernisation has watered down this relationship: many Kenyan youth are unaware of traditional social structures but are instead conversant with, and faithful to, modern trends. Youth have also been gravely under-represented in public policy and decision-making forums (NPI, 2009). Recent efforts to ensure youth representation within the country's development sphere – much of which emerged from the country's National Youth Policy – have been shrouded with

a general lack of transparency and political manipulation, so that selected individuals are not representative of their constituencies.

### **Exclusion or the lack of knowledge of government policy towards youth**

Despite the implementation of a rigorous policy framework and various development initiatives to empower Kenya's youth, the majority of youth are either unaware of the existing National Youth Policy or misinformed of how it relates to them. This fundamental challenge inhibits any successful youth initiatives, as it remains impossible to engage an entire constituency successfully without their support for – let alone awareness of – such programmes. The current practice is that programmes are often designed and implemented by government agencies, and the youth are only engaged as beneficiaries as opposed to a credible constituency that can frame programmes and policies (Njonjo et al., 2009). The Youth Agenda, a Kenyan civil society organisation (CSO) that examines the youth's dynamic role in society, uncovered that 41.5% of Kenyan youth were not familiar with the former constitution, which was repealed in 2010 (The Youth Agenda, 2010). Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) determined that 87% of youth respondents believed that the government was reluctant to address youth policy issues, with specific reference to job creation (Ibid.). Another illustration of this is the Youth Enterprise Development Fund, where the youth lack the essential details on how a fund designed for their support is being managed to address their challenges. Fredericksen (2010) argues that the youth frustration in Kenya is a result of the failure to participate in political and economic life within society.

The consistent exclusion and marginalisation of the youth from decision-making positions on matters of national development also undermine the likely effectiveness of government youth policies. Youth representation in public life has been dismal, as existing governance structures have disempowered the youth acutely. Their presence can be seen as tokenism: youth policies disproportionately emphasise formal channels of youth decision-making and ignore critical informal channels and spaces. Fredericksen discusses 'legitimate' youth activity to include mainstream churches, sports clubs and non-governmental



organisations (NGOs), as these attract ‘respectable’ youth with salaried jobs and legitimate business positions. On the other hand, what would be considered ‘illegitimate’ youth activity takes place in indigenous or charismatic youth movements, gangs, subcultures and political youth wings, which often attract lower-class individuals who want to make money with less respect to legal/illegal methods. It is this narrow thinking that undermines the creative engagement with the youth constituency as a whole, and the subsequent marginalisation of particular sections of the youth population. While criminal activity must be discouraged, it is important to note that non-conventional youth groupings have a contribution to make and needs that must be met; the Kenyan government must, as such, creatively find a way to engage with them.

### **Economic challenges**

With the realities of unemployment and the slow recovery of Kenya’s economic sector, the youth struggle to find jobs or access credit and loans necessary for starting their own businesses. Most youth are unable to own land for socio-economic reasons, and even in instances where they can own land, they lack capital to maintain its productivity. Starting new trade is also extremely difficult as the agricultural monopoly of big corporations impedes the youth’s competitive ability. Those young people who are employed more often than not earn too little to become economically independent. The Kenyan government’s inability to generate adequate jobs for the youth continues to be a challenge, as annually only 25% of the 500 000 eligible youth are absorbed into the labour market (NPI, 2009). Other factors that could contribute to this challenge include economic corruption, mismanagement and a generational domination by an older age group, tribal or family affiliations.

The growth of micro-enterprises provides the best opportunity for youth livelihood: *jua kali*, Kenya’s informal enterprise sector, has grown to engage some 70% of the labour force (often in part-time, underpaid, short-term jobs). Microfinance is key to resolving some of the economic challenges that plague the youth, and there are numerous youth-led informal enterprises and organisations that are testament to this as a method (USAID, 2009).

### **Growing insecurity**

The atmosphere of constant insecurity that plagues urban centres interprets youth as both victims and suspects. There have been numerous reports of local authorities targeting and harassing youth, while the proliferation of gangs and organised crime have also ensnared youth who, ultimately, become easy prey. Over time, the youth have lost trust in Kenya's political institutions and social structures, and in their leaders' willingness and/or abilities to protect them (USAID, 2009). This has then resulted in their alienation from formal institutions and their subsequent reliance on militias and gangs for protection.

### **Skills and training**

The lack of relevant education and vocational training among the youth is a growing concern.<sup>5</sup> Kenya's modules of education rely on a rigid examination system that drives both curriculum and pedagogies but fails to integrate real-life applications, subsequently short-falling the market demand for Kenyans with sufficient qualifications (USAID, 2009). The high cost of education also feeds into this concern, as it excludes those who cannot afford education. Despite over 30 public and private universities, under 5% of university-aged youth are enrolled at tertiary institutions; further, less than 50% of those students who pass the nationwide matriculation exams actually attend university, as they are unable to win public or private sponsorships and thus cannot afford the cost (Otieno, 2009). Out-of-school youth want and need ways of achieving competencies that are practical and recognised as legitimate (USAID, 2009). There is a growing demand for technical education, but this must be market-driven to avoid an excess of workers without jobs, as witnessed in Kenya's *jua kali* sector.

### **Urbanisation**

The majority of youth in Nairobi are migrant job-seekers from the countryside—the city continues to serve as the economic hub of Kenya and attracts people

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5 Omaera, M., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 4 August 2011.

from around the country in pursuit of employment, better standards of living and engagement in other economic activities. Most youth are either unemployed or are self-employed with menial jobs, and form part of the poor working class. These large numbers of youth easily constitute ‘an army of idle’, people who could easily be manipulated into mass action, which could result in political instability.

### **Credible organising**

Despite the significant youth bulge throughout the country, their ability to organise and take advantage of such numbers is consistently challenged. Although there is uniformity in challenge and cause, often the youth demographic is easily manipulated and pulled by issues of ethnicity. While there are hundreds of youth organisations across the country, these organisations are incapable of reaching the entire youth population. An NPI study shows that in many instances, organisations will often bypass youth who are poorly educated, illiterate or under-resourced (NPI, 2009).

## **The danger of exclusion: An analysis of the legitimacy and growth of the Mungiki sect in Kenya**

### **Militant youth groups in Kenya**

Largely the result of the societal conditions outlined above, Kenya is turning into fertile ground for the proliferation of armed youth groups. Towards the end of former President Daniel Arap Moi’s reign, such groups emerged and started small but violent campaigns within their local communities. These youth groups exist within both urban and rural contexts, and have played significant roles in Kenya’s recent history. Most youth groups walk a fine line between the politics of protection and the violence of criminality, imposing security services on residents, restaurants and local businesses in exchange for fees and a modicum of security (Anderson, 2002). While some communities interpret these vigilante groups as an appropriate response to Nairobi’s lack of security, others lament

the groups' extortionary practices and penchant for indiscriminate violence and harassment. In October 2010, Kenya's police outlawed 33 such groups – including the Mungiki and its Nairobi rivals, the Taliban – under the 2010 Organised Crimes Act.<sup>6</sup> While few appropriate measures have been taken to enforce this ban, the police have come to interpret this legislation as a licence to act with impunity against the youth. The Mungiki were among the primary executors of 2007–8 post-election violence and symbolise the increased politicisation of youth vigilantes. The rest of this chapter will provide a case study of the Mungiki sect: the decision to focus exclusively on the Mungiki lies in the fact that it is a complex organisation comprising competing cultural, political and social interests while representing an important cross-section of Kenyan youth life. Given their role in the Kenyan political processes, this group constitutes an important analytical pivot for dissecting the role of the youth in the country's conflicts.

### Genesis of the group

The Mungiki sect cannot be defined as one thing; rather, it is part criminal organisation, part social movement, part political wing, and part ethnic and religious sect (Rasmussen, 2010). The Mungiki case is an illustration of the existing discord between a marginalised segment of the country's youth and Kenya's dominant socio-political structures. 'Mungiki' is a Kikuyu word for the masses (Ndūng'ũ, 2010). Members of the Mungiki are said to be commonly found around Nairobi and Central Province, Rift Valley Province and other parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> Large segments of its membership are from the Agikuyu community, though alliances have formed with other communities over time (Ndūng'ũ, 2010).

Born in response to former President Moi's predatory government, the Mungiki have consistently reincorporated traditional Kikuyu practices and values – not

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6 Such banned groups include the Mungiki, the Taliban, Jeshi la Mzee, Jeshi la Embakasi, Jeshi la King'ole, Majeshi la Wazee, the Kaya Bombo Youth, the Baghdad Boys, the Chinkororo, the Amachuma and Somalia's Al Shabaab.

7 Warugi, A., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 1 August 2011.

only to create a niche within society but also to mobilise youth responses to pervasive political, economic and ethnic tensions. The Mungiki movement was formed by John Maina Njenga in the late 1980s, who was said to have received a vision from *Ngai* (God) commanding him to liberate his people (the Agikuyu) from oppression (at the time, oppression was perceived to stem from the Moi regime). On many levels, the movement is similar to that of the Mau Mau, as both share Agikuyu roots and practices. The Mungiki movement is founded on the liberating and revolutionary principles of the Mau Mau soldiers and traditional Kikuyu beliefs of youth empowerment (Dimova, 2010). Kagwanja describes how generational politics, found at the heart of Kikuyu culture and history, perpetuated the notion of a youth revolution by identifying two major traditional Kikuyu cultural ideologies (Kagwanja, 2003). First, the *ituika* system embodies a generational transfer of power that has fuelled Kenyan youths, dating back to the Mau Mau fighters of the 1950s. The *ituika* system comprises of two generations: the *Mwangi* (the generation that led the revolt against oppression, i.e. British colonial officials) and the *Irungu* (the subsequent generation responsible for fostering a new and inclusive society). This system thus “produced a political dispensation in which the whole Kikuyu nation was divided into two generations, the older one in power and the younger one waiting in the wings. It also formalised the alternating succession of ritual authority between the two generations” (Kagwanja, 2005:61). Second, the *iregi* myth has fuelled the military aspirations of this youth generation, as the *irigi* are “a revolutionary generation that rebelled against and overthrew tyranny and restored the right of citizenship and civic virtues in the mythical Kikuyu society” (Ibid.). Jomo Kenyatta, the country’s founding father and first president, incorporated the *iregi* into the *ituika* generational system in his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, which not only created a profound association between the *iregi* revolutionary fighters and the *Irungu* generation of the Kikuyu political dispensation, but also catalysed a meaningful connection between the Mau Mau independence fighters and the Kikuyu mythologies. Fifty years later, the Mungiki movement reincorporated such traditional paradigms into its struggle against Kenya’s political system.

The sect’s genesis and growth must be understood within both the context of traditional Kikuyu paradigms and the contextual realities of Kenya during the

1990s. First, the Mungiki youth's interpretations of Kenya's political system were heavily influenced by the Mau Mau traditional narratives. Mungiki leaders accused President Moi of pillaging the youth and starving the Kenyan nation; the Mungiki also insisted that the older generations must be removed from power as they had failed to ensure a successful transfer of generational power (Kagwanja, 2005). In this sense, the Mungiki reinterpreted its role as a new force that would re-establish the balance between the older and younger generations. It is this thinking that saw the Mungiki assume a revolutionary mentality and, subsequently, readjusted its cultural, political and social lifestyle to encompass the traditional warrior lifestyle.<sup>8</sup> Other factors – such as corruption, rampant violence, rising economic inequalities and the ethno-politicisation of tribal identity – increasingly contributed to the Mungiki's militarised identity (Dimova, 2010). The organisation's violent practices arose from the ethnically motivated political violence in 1992 and 1997 when government-sponsored Kalenjin militia attacked, killed and uprooted thousands of Kikuyus in the Rift Valley (Ibid.). The Mungiki sought to empower its membership in every possible way, including through the use of violence. When the Mungiki movement stepped outside of the rural base and ventured into the urban areas it absorbed some criminal characteristics and was transformed into a largely violent gang that was gradually co-opted by sections of the ruling elite to serve its patrimonial interests (Anderson, 2002).

During the 2002 political succession period and election cycle, President Moi attempted to use generational politics to outmanoeuvre his opponents. Moi chose Uhuru Kenyatta, son of former president Jomo Kenyatta, as his successor on the Kenya African National Union (KANU) party ticket; Kenyatta's selling point was that he was a youthful candidate.<sup>9</sup> This appealed to the Mungiki grouping, which responded by supporting the nomination and seeing this as a generational transfer of power. What is unique about the Mungiki political choice was that

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8 Includes assuming the name *munjama* (translated as 'warrior'), incorporating combat lexicons and warrior dances into non-militant environments, and choosing a diet of meat and milk (the preferred food of Kikuyu warriors preparing for war) (Kagwanja, 2005).

9 Kenyatta was also seen as a proxy candidate through which Moi intended on extending his patrimonial rule over Kenya (Kagwanja, 2005).

it endorsed Kenyatta not on the basis of his ethnic grouping, but because he represented youth. His subsequent defeat by the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) party under the leadership of Mwai Kibaki, a veteran politician, was perceived to be a betrayal of the youth constituency. For the Mungiki, ethnic identification has become synonymous with discourses of youth and poverty. Generational transfers of power are central to its understanding of an ideal political culture (Fredericksen, 2010). Age-sets are a key structure in the Kikuyu ‘traditional’ social organisation, where the transfer of power from one generation to the next is a socially sanctioned ceremony enshrouded with rites of passage. When this transfer did not occur, the Mungiki directly fuelled social disarray and revolt: the periods following the elections evidenced numerous counts of destruction from the Mungiki, which even, at times, confessed to sponsorship from a KANU Member of Parliament (Kagwanja, 2005). The NARC government immediately resolved to destroy the Mungiki sect, which then responded by resorting to absolute violence (Ibid.) – a battle waged over a number of years.

As mentioned earlier, the state’s inability to maintain a monopoly over the use of violence and its unwillingness to uphold its responsibilities to the social contract have resulted in the continued growth of the Mungiki sect. The organisation has, in recent years, taken control of significant portions of Nairobi’s slums and taxed access to basic services including water, sanitation, rent and transportation (Dimova, 2010). Through this provision of basic services, the Mungiki has legitimised itself as a powerful stakeholder within both Kenyan society and politics (Ibid.). Media reports highlight a continued growing influence of the movement in the control and management of basic services, such as water and security, in slum settlements in Nairobi (Ruteere, 2008). The sect also operates protection services for a host of clientele, including poor slum dwellers, small business owners and transport operators, while charging fees to those who pass through their areas. The group maintained a reputable portfolio of crusades against alcohol, drugs, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) throughout the late 1990s, but then used such positive social capital to take over Nairobi slums (Country of Origin, 2010). It is important to note that most media classify the Mungiki as an organised criminal gang that relies on extortion and violence to achieve its goals.

In her thesis, Dimova (2010) argues that this organisation is fundamentally a by-product of the same factors that have consistently destabilised the state since independence in 1964: unequal resource distribution and the ethno-politicisation of Kenyan society. In terms of the preconditions for the rise of political society, the Mungiki sect has satisfied most of the prerequisites by having members that comprise the urban youth, women, poor peasants, migrants and the internally displaced (Fredericksen, 2010). In different ways, these are population groups that have consistently been failed or targeted by a state that has been unsuccessful in delivering on its social contract.

### **Mungiki – the plague?**

In a bid to increase its standing and influence in Kenya, the Mungiki regularly used violent practices – the sect is not only responsible for a high proportion of violence in Nairobi but has also been implicated in attacks on both citizens and the police. As its practices are derived from traditional Kikuyu teachings and traditions, the media has often dismissed the Mungiki as a traditionalist sect. Further, this portrayal has played a significant role in the manner in which other communities perceive the Mungiki, subsequently fuelling the fear of those who do not belong to this group. Over time, however, and with the constructed alliances that it enjoys with members of other communities, there has been a shift in perception: the Mungiki is now regarded as one of the few urban youth groups to be founded upon a genuine social and political agenda (Servant, 2007).

The Mungiki, according to Servant (2007), has established itself to be one of most powerful actors within Nairobi's 143 slums; subsequently, it is a major player within Nairobi, as 60% of city's population lives in such slums. The Mungiki continues to play a part in many of Kenya's challenges – be they religious tensions, ethnic frictions, political struggles, property rights or issues of security. By choosing sides within these divisive societal debates, the Mungiki has unintentionally perpetuated the negative thinking and perceptions that some continue to hold of it. The movement is a dynamic player in the realm of violence, and acts as a force in areas that are ignored by the police. Its militant methods of dealing with defectors are another reason for suspicion and fear.



Most defectors will admit that they are afraid of being severely harassed or killed; most individuals who leave the movement will often move to other towns to ensure their security (Ndūng'ũ, 2010). The Mungiki is adamant that one can never retire or defect from the movement.

Even though the Mungiki sect was banned in March 2002, it remains a prominent constituency in today's politics and its numbers continue to increase.<sup>10</sup> Servant argues that the Mungiki phenomenon is part of the erosion of political legitimacy of the government and the physical insecurity that plagues Nairobi. Its propensity to commit violent crimes, however – highlighted by the 2009 Mathira Massacre – reduces its legitimacy in society.<sup>11</sup> In response to such violent acts, the government has addressed the issue of the Mungiki with force. In 2007, the government arrested over 2 464 members of the sect. It also established the Kwekwe force, a paramilitary unit mandated to crackdown on Mungiki. The Kwekwe force was sanctioned to use force, leading to the sect operating as a hit-squad (Alston, 2009). Despite police crackdowns, most Mungiki enjoy relative impunity throughout society, begging the question as to whether the masses, or groupings such as Mungiki, can be silenced. While state structures have tried to eliminate the sect, the Mungiki's visibility and operation as a central actor in Kenyan socio-economic circles is ironic, as the state continues to fail in delivering basic services.

The complex relationship between the Mungiki and the Kikuyu community is unique. The Mungiki does not see itself as ordinary Kikuyu, and its outsider status has created a second layer of conflict for the dynamic youth sect. A portion of its negative reputation has been influenced by violence committed against fellow Kikuyu tribesmen. Antagonisms between the Mungiki and Kikuyu society have often been overlooked, and this antagonism is said to have precluded Mungiki from committing revenge on behalf of Kikuyu society (Peters, 2011). The Mungiki view the ruling Kikuyu elites as conservatives who wanted to use

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10 Warugi, A., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 1 August 2011.

11 The Mungiki took responsibility for the death of 29 villagers in the Nyeri district of Kenya's Central Province on 21 April 2009. The attack was in response to the death of a Mungiki member a day earlier, who was said to be killed by a villager in the Nyeri district (*Daily Nation*, 2009).

politics instead of force during the Mau Mau independence struggle (Ibid.). During the Kibaki administration, a large number of Mungiki were murdered by police in extrajudicial killings, as a result of the government's frustration with increasing crime in Nairobi. Such killings not only increased antagonism between the organisation and the PNU government, but also pitted the Mungiki against many Kikuyus. Peters (2011) argues that Mungiki members are more concerned with intra-Kikuyu class conflict than inter-ethnic antagonisms, which were viewed as a Kikuyu elite strategy to retain power (Ndũng'ũ, 2010). On the other hand, there is also evidence that the Mungiki can be bought by the political elite to ensure specific ends; it is this service that contributes to the sect's loss of legitimacy within its communities. A third consideration to add is that the Mungiki also fought during the post-election violence to protect its Kikuyu communities.

### **Mungiki involvement in the 2007–8 post-election violence in Kenya**

As surmised above, the 2007–8 elections were followed by outbursts of violence across many of Kenya's regions. However, some have questioned the conclusion that the violence was solely because of the contested election results. The fact that coordinated attacks in the Rift Valley occurred before the final results were announced underscores the reality that the elections were a trigger, but not the root cause, of the violence. Kenya's political environment at the time had been inflated with ethnic hatred, stereotyping and suspicion throughout the campaigning period (CIPEV, 2008). Ethnic violence was systematically carried out by private armies/militias commissioned by particular politicians to safeguard their political interests (Ndũng'ũ, 2010). It is this creation and strengthening of militia groups by Kenyan politicians that legitimises these groups to their populations, and such legitimacy is difficult to withdraw. A March 2009 survey by the organisation Media Focus on Africa highlighted the widely held belief that politicians were seen as the main instigators of violence throughout Kenya's provinces, as the following percentages of respondents identified politicians as key antagonists: Rift Valley (95%), Western (92%), Central (91.8%), Coast (91.2%), North Eastern (89.3%), Nairobi (88.5%), Nyanza (83.5%) and Eastern

(55%) (Media Focus on Africa, 2009). What was significant in this election, as with the previous election, was the presence of the Mungiki during the post-election violence cycle, which symbolised the importance of generational politics as a counterforce to state power and government corruption.

During the 2007–8 post-election violence, a substantial proportion of the population participated in protests – a reality that Dimova (2010) attributes to the snowball effect of grassroots mobilisation. The forces behind grassroots youth mobilisation could be summarised as: political populism, flawed election results, historical continuities, an entrenched culture of political violence and the diffusion of formal monopoly on violence (Ibid.). Following attacks on Kikuyu tribesmen in the Rift Valley, there was a popular perception that the government was unable to maintain its monopoly on violence and, subsequently, that “the Kikuyu community seems to be slowly accepting the Mungiki sect in its stead” (Frederiksen, 2010:1084; Waki Commission 2008:215). It is at this juncture in the conflict when the Mungiki began offering security for a community with whom it had previously been at odds. The Mungiki’s actual involvement in post-election violence has been of great interest to many, as the NARC-led coalition government viciously targeted them for years while the Mungiki’s leadership was either in jail or hiding in fear of arrest (Ruteere, 2009). The Mungiki’s propensity to mobilise quickly and in great numbers was a surprise to many. When discussing the baffling nature of the Mungiki, Fredericksen (2010) summarises the grouping as one that is closely related to formal politics, negotiating with representatives of national political parties and seeking to register first as an organisation, then as a political party. At the same time, the Mungiki is a proscribed organisation, and its members and leaders are hunted down, harassed and sometimes killed. In Nairobi’s slums, the Mungiki compete with religious and welfare-oriented NGOs that offer promises of social mobility through voluntary work and access to foreign funding, and which are less active in their critique of the state (Fredericksen, 2010).

When studying the involvement of the Mungiki in the aftermath of the post-election violence, Ndũng’ũ makes an interesting observation that in the Mathare slums, many tenants from the Luo community refused to pay their rent as a demonstration of their solidarity against the Kikuyu community. The landlords in the area engaged the Mungiki to collect the rent for a commission (Ndũng’ũ,

2010) – a service that the sect has maintained to date.<sup>12</sup> The prevalence of crime and high levels of poverty in the slums is a big factor in explaining the success of Mungiki operations in the area (Ndũng'ũ, 2010). As the government has been incapable of responding effectively in Kenya's slums, groups such as the Mungiki, which can enforce some form of order, are able to flourish (Ndũng'ũ, 2010). However, it is important to note that during the periods following the elections, the police resumed their crackdown on the group: a number of the Mungiki's leaders were executed in 2008 and, controversy persists as to who was responsible for these executions (Ruteere, 2009). What is interesting is that this has not crippled the growth of the movement.

The Mungiki is but one useful illustration of a constituency that is growing as a result of disgruntlement and discontent. There are a number of youth groupings in Kenya that also continue to grow, with the same frustrations. The discussion of this group is illustrative of the danger that lies in marginalising a segment of the population – in this case, the youth.

## **Recommendations on enhancing the youth constituency to avert future conflict**

### **Creation of preventive action platforms**

The Kenyan government and CSOs need to formulate a preventive action plan that includes an early warning component which monitors different communities and potential violent outbreaks. This needs to be matched with adequate response mechanisms.

The alienation of the youth and their standing as a stakeholder rather than an actor inhibits serious efforts for the government to incorporate this demographic constructively. A culture of peace can only be created by working together: the platform being proposed here speaks to how government and CSOs can engage with one another and with the youth to promote peace.

Constant conversations on peace must be encouraged. It is ineffective to continue to deliberate on issues of peace without meaningfully involving the

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12 Warugi, A., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 1 August 2011.

youth constituency. Creative methods can be used to encourage dialogue, but these must never replace direct and encompassing conversation and negotiation. Panels formed to address particular national issues must always include a legitimate youth perspective, and this can be done by ensuring that youth from all segments of Kenyan society are represented in different policy dimensions. It goes without saying that the youth are passionate about participating; the question is whether the government and all other stakeholders are engaging them actively as partners to ensure the sustainability of peace. It is impossible to pre-emptively prevent conflict without addressing this large segment of Kenyan society.

### **Encourage youth economic growth**

One of the most acute problems that confronts the youth is that of economic marginalisation: unemployment continues to be a big issue in Kenya for both skilled and unskilled individuals. Most political campaigns are dominated by promises for the creation of jobs, but these promises are often unmatched. The lack of jobs leads to idle and frustrated youth, making them a likely target for recruitment into destructive criminal or violent activity. In rural areas, land distribution grievances result in high numbers of angry, idle youth who could easily be manipulated into violence.

There is a need to seek creative ideas to rejuvenate the growth of the Kenyan economy and create more opportunities for youth to acquire technical skills. The Kenyan government must simultaneously increase the equitable distribution of resources and use affirmative action policies to encourage and harness youth initiatives. Economic policies – including on access to land and starting small businesses, as well as quotas for youth demographics – must be enacted and widely disseminated to help facilitate youth development.

Taking into consideration that most youth are in the informal sectors of society, it is imperative that investments are made into informal spaces and livelihood channels for youth. This would include reorienting the education system to include technical skills that could form a ready market for youth self-employment

opportunities. Whilst this is being done, creative ways in which to enhance such efforts should be encouraged, as this could be a vital method by which the youth can be engaged.

Meaningful security finds expression in freeing individuals from want. Therefore, it is imperative that if we are to speak of security for the youth, then this must include reasonable economic freedom – which, in turn, requires constant creative thinking that seeks to narrow the gaps of economic inequality.

### **Deliberate inclusion of youth in political life**

Political life in Kenya needs to transcend the ruling elites and include new youthful leadership. Most of today's dominant figures have been in the political circles since the independence movement of the 1950s. This creates the impression that politics is the domain of the few, favouring the ruling elites.<sup>13</sup> Gradually, there is a call to include the youth in the decision-making arena. Former President Moi is renowned for his statement that the youth is tomorrow's future leadership – but, as time has passed, the question has become: when will the future be?

The violent upheavals experienced over time in urban centres can be seen as youth attempts to overcome frustration, stemming from sentiments of inferiority. There is seemingly a battle between the ordinary citizens versus the ruling elites (Dimova, 2010). Violence, resulting from feelings of exclusion, then becomes a meaningful force of change. The concern, subsequently, is whether this demographic will seek to consolidate itself to counter the exclusion it experiences. This might take the form of social protests or outright violent attacks. Also, if the youth constitutes 75% of Kenya's population, it is only proper that representation be equitable.

### **Moving beyond paper protection and provisioning**

There is a need to increase the knowledge and understanding of youth policies and platforms. The one finding of this work is that the limited knowledge of

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13 Omaera, M., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 4 August 2011.

what is contained in the policies has been the detriment of the youth movement. Most young people are hugely unaware of the policies and programmes that exist to enhance their lives (NPI, 2009). Also, a harmonised definition of what youth means is critical to ensuring that the constituency is properly engaged; while an increased knowledge of the policies would also act as a check to ensure that the government implements the articulated policy plans. A uniform concept of ‘youth’ would also help agencies and organisations coordinate policies and responses to youth challenges (Ibid).

The Kenyan Human Development Report looks into priority areas for the youth demographic and identifies issues of youth migration, youth unemployment, youth groups at risk (such as disabled and HIV-infected youths) and issues of gender. Taking these issues into consideration, there is a realisation that if the goals articulated in Vision 2030<sup>14</sup> are to be realised, there must be a reasonable degree of inclusion of youth in the development agenda. This inclusion must bear a gender balance to ensure that the needs of female youth are met (UNDP, 2010).

Better coordination and integration of the various national policies would ensure that the youth are adequately provided for and represented. The World Development Report, in evaluating former Kenyan youth politics, recommended that there is a need to invest in youth citizenship, as this will have an implication on issues of participation and development (World Bank, 2007).

### **Effective service delivery**

As already discussed in this chapter, the government’s inability to deliver on its social contract mandate is of concern. It is a greater concern for populations that live in slum areas, where the government lacks the necessary infrastructure to deliver basic goods and services. The Mungiki, for example, has been operating like an underground government, delivering basic social services such as water,

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14 Kenya Vision 2030 is a 2007 policy document, published by the Kenyan CSO “The Youth Agenda” that outlines economic, social, and political policies for enhancing future youth participation in Kenyan society.

sanitation and security.<sup>15</sup> The problem with this is the increased legitimacy of groups such as the Mungiki, with people now looking to them to deliver rather than the government.

A question asked for the purposes of this research is how the Kenyan government can reclaim legitimacy over its citizens. The response echoed was that the government must be able to increase and enhance its service delivery. There must be no population groups that feel they are unprotected or uncared for by the government. As it is, there is the perception that the government is available in affluent areas but, other than occasional harassment by the police, they are unavailable in low-income areas where the majority of city populations live.

The security of a person cannot be regarded as the concern and responsibility of a vigilante group, and it is worrying that local populations have come to trust and accept these vigilante groups as their protectors. There is an urgent need to enhance the security sector throughout the country. Service delivery is key to averting conflict in Kenya: if people feel that their government cares, they are likely to engage more positively.

### **Enhancing the Kenyan identity**

Throughout Kenya's history, politics has been the pawn of excessive ethnic manipulation. Identity in and of itself is not a bad thing, but the manipulation of one identity against another or the deliberate assumption that one ethnic grouping is greater than another is a cause of conflict. Election periods have often been characterised by ethnic 'pulling', where politicians appeal to their targeted constituents from an ethnic platform. This can only be countered by the realisation of one national identity. Over time, there has been an emphasis that every citizen is first a Kenyan. This, however, has constantly been undermined by politicians, who have used exclusionary ethnic platforms to consolidate power around themselves. There is the need to look into what it means to be a Kenyan, and to promote this ideal.

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15 Osido, K., 2011. Interview on Youth in Kenya by Grace Maina, 11 August 2011.



Politicking on the basis of ethnicity needs to be discouraged, as this continues to undermine the whole political experience. In the recent past, action over hate speech has been taken, and this has resulted in politicians being more accountable for how they motivate the masses. The indictment of the 'Ocampo Six' has also been instrumental in showing that there are repercussions to inciting one community against the other.

The Kenyan identity is an ideal that can be realised in future generations and in this specific youth generation. As ironic as it may be, the analysis that the Mungiki sees itself as a youth bloc first before it is Kikuyu, is instructive – perhaps the youth generation can overcome tribal politics. However, it also raises a new concern: division on the basis of economic class. The Kenyan identity that is proposed here needs to counter not only tribal politics, but also class stratification and the associated exclusions.

## Conclusion

This chapter identified the root causes of Kenyan conflicts to be the same over the years, as issues of ethnicity, marginalisation and exclusion continue to characterise socio-economic and political life in the country. An interesting dynamic is that the stratification in society is no longer confined to identity based on ethnicity, but transcends these divisions to issues of class and age. Gradually, populations excluded from the full benefits of Kenyan identity because of poverty and age are consolidating and mobilising themselves around the commonalities of their struggles and life. It is these similar life experiences that continue to solidify a common identity, which then legitimises the workings of social groupings such as the Mungiki. If the youth continue to be marginalised, they will find expression in these militia groupings, who offer them a platform to engage.

Issues of service delivery are pertinent to the whole youth constituency. To reverse the trend of underground governance, as discussed here with regard to the Mungiki, the government must engage effectively in service delivery. This is the only way the populations will begin to look upon the government

as the rightful custodian of the social contract. If local populations in slums and the lower-income areas of the country continue to receive social services from militia groups, the value of the government to those populations will always be questioned. Enshrining the need for and importance of youth development in Article 55 of the 2010 Constitution was an important first step for Kenya. However, a multifaceted approach is required to mobilise this constituency effectively.

Human security challenges must also be addressed to relieve the pressure arising from the rapidly increasing youth population. There is a danger when the internal security of any state is reliant on vigilante youth groups. The ease in which local populations seem to have adjusted to security offered by the Mungiki for a charge is worrying. The lack of security in low-income areas and the inability of the state to protect all citizens is a growing concern – and the gap that vigilante groups occupy continues to legitimise private security brokers over the state. Every citizen is entitled to security, and it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that each citizen is recipient of this security. The government must find creative ways through which to safeguard the citizens' right to security.

The argument for the generational transfer of power has merit. The political machinery of Kenya must make space for the youth. There is inherent danger in ignoring this constituency, as this is likely to result in youth mobilisation. As evidenced elsewhere in the world, the power of such mobilisation and social protests cannot be disregarded. Should the youth consolidate around this identity – and this can happen – the result could be mass action, which will demand political inclusion and transformation. There is thus an urgent need to find ways to absorb and engage the youth population meaningfully, so as to curtail their exploitation and ensure sustainable peace.

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# Interrogating traditional youth theory: Youth peacebuilding and engagement in post-conflict Liberia

Martha Mutisi

## Introduction

Young people are rapidly increasing as a percentage of the world's population and in Liberia, youths constitute more than 60% of the population. As a result of its youthful population, the country's already-existing challenges of unemployment, poverty, lack of education and skills, and a history of instability are supposedly likely to be exacerbated. Cognisant that youths can also be an important resource for peace and conflict prevention, this chapter first examines the background to Liberia's conflict and then focuses on government and civil society's efforts towards enhancing young people's contributions in post-conflict initiatives in Liberia.

Building on qualitative field research in Liberia, this chapter connects its primary case study with secondary data and theory, to analyse how Liberia's youth population is engaged in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding following the end of a 14-year civil war in 2003. Research was characterised by interviews with key actors and stakeholders in the peacebuilding realm, informal interviews with local people and participant observation of everyday activities at a local level. While the resultant analysis is mindful of the limitations faced by the Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf government in engaging youths in the country's peacebuilding process, it is more focused on youth-led initiatives which demonstrate their agency. Disregarding the 'youth bulge thesis', this chapter focuses instead on the several cases where youth energies have been positively



expended in Liberia. The argument is that young people's re-engagement in post-conflict Liberia has been characterised by individual and group agency. Organic initiatives by young people in transforming their reality are central to Liberia's post-conflict reconstruction process. Although youth participation in socio-economic and political processes in Liberia is far from ideal, this chapter asserts that the existing pockets of youth engagement in the country are enough evidence to dilute the 'youth bulge' and 'youth crisis' theses which have tended to vilify youths in West Africa.

### **Background to the Liberia conflict**

Liberia is classified as a post-conflict society, and such a society is generally perceived as undergoing processes of transition from a state of fragile, negative peace to a state of stable, positive peace. On 11 October 2011, the nation of Liberia went to the polls to choose the country's leader – for the second time after the end of a 14-year civil war – and the voting was credited with largely being peacefully conducted. The absence of a clear majority winner led to a run-off election in November 2011, after which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was again voted in as president.

Liberia became known for its internal armed conflict, which killed more than 250 000 people and displaced over one million people. The country experienced two civil wars between 1989 and 2003, both related to ethnic tensions and struggles for political control. The first civil war had a background in a 1980 bloody coup that was led by Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, a native Liberian who executed President Tolbert and 13 of his ministers, subsequently leading to the emergence into power of the People's Redemption Council (PRC). Doe immediately suspended the constitution, assuming total power. However, owing to mounting pressure for democratisation, Doe was forced to conduct elections in 1985. Although he won these elections, they were roundly criticised for being fraudulent and characterised by irregularities, violence and intimidation (Clapham, 1989:106).

The Doe regime was characterised by inept governance, a shrinking economy (Osaghae, 1996:76), and rising repression – a status of affairs that ultimately

contributed to heightening perceptions of illegitimacy and increasing frustration in the country. Subsequently, in December 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched an attack through Côte d'Ivoire against Doe's government forces. Taylor and the NPFL unseated the Doe regime, and took over most of rural Liberia. Ultimately, the NPFL established control by setting up its own government – the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG). Following the execution of Doe by a splinter group of the NPFL, Taylor assumed total control of Liberia. However, his tenure did not seem to bring stability, as warring factions and dissent groups mushroomed during his reign, prompting a protracted civil conflict in the country. In 1996, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was able to interrupt the conflict, which allowed for legitimate presidential elections in 1997. Despite the controversy, these elections saw Taylor victorious as the new president, and the civil war briefly ended (Harris, 1999). However, the new Taylor government was not that different to the Doe regime in its lack of democratic processes and its failure to transform the underlying preconditions for violence. Taylor “did not establish sufficient legitimacy for the state, while the regime's use of state assets and the country's natural resources for personal aggrandisement – at the expense of providing basic security and equitable economic resources distribution – sharply reduced the little legitimacy Taylor had as a result of his popular election” (Saywer, 2008:366). As such, a new set of rebel groups – most notably Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) – emerged. The second civil war, which began in 1999, was an expression of opposition against Taylor's rule. Following regional and international diplomatic efforts, the armed conflict finally ended in August 2003 after the Accra Peace Agreement was signed between the Government of Liberia (GoL), LURD, MODEL and Liberia's 18 political parties. The National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was established in October 2003. The peace accord led to the creation of a transitional government and the holding of presidential elections in 2005, in which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected as Africa's first female president.

### **Root causes of the Liberian civil war**

The civil war that ravaged Liberia between 1989 and 2003 had myriad causes and actors. According to Sawyer (2008:370), the civil war in Liberia “originated in the particular constellation of political power, identity and resources”. The roots of the conflict in Liberia stretched far back in Liberian history, which has been marked by a series of conflicts and oppressive regimes. The colony of Liberia was founded by the American Colonisation Society (ACS), which arranged for the settlement of freed American slaves in Africa. The ACS administered Liberia until 1847 when the black settlers issued a declaration of independence, ending Liberia’s relationship with the ACS (Olukoju, 2006). Since 1847, the freed slaves, known as Americo-Liberians, formed the True Whig Party and dominated Liberian political life and monopolised socio-economic power for more than 130 years, while indigenous Liberians remained marginalised. The armed conflicts in Liberia were fuelled by structural causes, especially political marginalisation, poverty and macro-economic challenges. In particular, the economic collapse in the 1990s helped to erode human development and economic growth, prompting the emergence of dissent and rebellion. The ‘economic causes of conflict’ and ‘greed and grievance’ theses underscore that although the military and political elite did not necessarily share or endorse a political agenda, they were certainly interested in controlling the state and subsequently exploiting opportunities for private wealth accumulation (Reno, 1995, 1998; Collier and Hoeffler, 2003; 2004; Hoffman, 2006). The presence of ‘lootable’ resources (Collier, 2000) in the form of diamonds, helped rebels not only to fund the war but to find motivation to continue fighting.

Liberia enjoyed strong economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s as a result of massive flows of foreign direct investment (FDI), as well as increased exports of iron ore and rubber (IMF, 2005). The economic challenges of the late 1970s were accompanied by increasing oil prices that resulted in increases in food prices – especially rice, the staple food of Liberians – leading to street protests and riots. These were violently and militarily quelled by the government of President William Tolbert. Consequently, young, marginalised, unemployed and disenchanted Liberians became easy recruits to the conflict’s warring factions. In its 2009 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia

identified the major root causes of the conflict as poverty, greed, corruption, limited access to education, economic inequalities as well as unfair land tenure and distribution (TRC, 2009).

In both civil wars in Liberia, the manipulation of identity politics can be discerned; in this case, ethnicity. Political and military elites used identity to recruit supporters and fighters in their ranks. As Sawyer (2008:360) observes: “Samuel Doe, who belonged to the Krahn minority, ethnicised the various paramilitary groups – establishing essentially a Krahn Presidential Guard – that were implicated in a number of extra-judicial ethnic massacres.” In fact, during the first civil war, constantly shifting allegiances as well as the fractionalisation of movements demonstrated that ethnicity was a factor that political elites loved to manipulate to fulfil their goals of personal aggrandisement. Sawyer (2008) asserts that the antagonism between supporters of Doe and those of Taylor later metamorphosed into an ethnic-based conflict between the Mano and Gio, on the one hand, and the Krahn and Mandingo on the other hand. One of the reasons Taylor cited for taking over from Doe was that he was fighting for justice on behalf of the marginalised Gio and Mano ethnic groups. Another explanation for the conflict in Liberia focuses on generational divisions and the marginalisation of youth as a decisive factor. This was perpetuated by a state of “fragility among youth” in Liberia (Bøås and Dunn, 2007; Richards, 2005). Such explanations are akin to the ‘greed and grievance’ thesis by Collier et al. (2003; 2004; 2005), which emphasises the role of structural inequalities and economic motivations in fuelling conflict. According to Richards (1996:161), the civil war in Liberia was a reflection of the “drama of social exclusion”. Richards (2005; 2008) analysed land tenure laws in Liberia and concludes that, since the nineteenth century, land tenure laws have tended to award older men strong control over land, thereby propagating tenure insecurity among the younger population.

### **Contextualising youth engagement: Contemporary Liberia**

Currently, Liberia can be described as a post-conflict country that is undergoing transition. The Government of Liberia (GoL) is working towards building the

capacity of key institutions and addressing human development and economic growth issues. Although violent conflict ended in 2003, post-conflict Liberia remains one of the poorest fragile countries in the world. Approximately two decades of political instability and civil war have significantly eroded Liberia's productive capacity and socio-economic infrastructure. Despite the optimism and some marked achievements since the end of the civil war, peace in Liberia remains fragile. The post-conflict country faces both short-term and long-term challenges of restoring basic services, addressing the issues of poverty and unemployment, strengthening state institutions and rebuilding infrastructure. Additionally, the implementation of pledges made by President Johnson-Sirleaf, particularly those relating to the youth, has been perceived as slow, which makes consolidation of the 'peace dividend' a challenging task. Youth discontent was both the subject and object of Liberia's second post-conflict elections held in October 2011, five years into Johnson-Sirleaf's inaugural government.

### **Setting the stage: Towards a conceptualisation of youth**

The term 'youth' is a fluid and nebulous concept, varying across time, space, cultures and gender, as well as within societies. The concept has continually been redefined by authors from various persuasions including sociology, economics, demography and, recently, peace studies. In extant literature, there are two strands emerging when it comes to defining youth: one strand focuses on outlining biological distinctions between youths and adults, emphasising the age factor and chronological cut-off points, defining 'youth' as a period between puberty and parenthood. The second strand uses cultural markers, defining youth as a distinct social status that is accompanied by specific behaviours, roles, rituals, rites of passage and relationships. This social constructivist definition of youth has been highlighted by scholars studying non-Western societies (Newman, 2005; Sommers, 2001; Heninger and McKenna, 2005). These scholars highlight that 'youth' and 'adulthood' are socially constructed, earned, politicised, ritualised statuses which are not necessarily determined by age. In many traditional African societies, adulthood was reserved for men with relative wealth and social status, while everybody else retained the status of perpetual

minors, no matter how old they were. In contemporary African societies, youth is intrinsically linked with well-defined rites of passage and symbolic steps.

The World Youth Report, released in 2005, embraced this social constructivist perspective when it defined youth as “an important period of physical, mental and social maturation, where young people are actively forming identities and determining acceptable roles for themselves within their community and society as a whole”. In essence, youth is often the age where identity is increasingly interrogated, negotiated and refined; it is a complex reality. As a result of the problematique surrounding the construction of youth, Alex de Waal (2002:15) asserts: “The concept of youth is a Western concept and a political construct.... Youth is a problematic, intermediary and ambivalent category, chiefly defined by what it is not: youth are not dependent children, nor are they independent, socially responsible adults.”

Despite the complexities in defining this concept, in general, it is agreed that youth is the period that is characterised by the transition from childhood to adulthood, and it is marked by social, cultural and physical changes among the affected individuals. Peace and security scholars Ismail et al. (2009:22) contend that the construct of youth is a social rank that is connected to patterns of entitlement and social status. Curtain (2004) suggests that in most societies, the period of youth is wherein individuals demonstrate the capacity to contribute to the economic welfare of the family. In addition, the concept of youth reflects complex interplay between personal, institutional, political, social and economic processes that young people have to manage within their everyday interactions (UN World Youth Report, 2003:16). The UN General Assembly defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. In its World Development Report (2007), the World Bank expanded the category of youth by defining the minimum age as 12 years, thereby reflecting the Breton Woods Institution's focus on the productive age.

The African Youth Charter (AYC) defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years (AU, 2006). This definition was agreed upon in 2006 during the African Union (AU) Heads of States conference held in Banjul, Gambia, where the AYC was adopted. Similarly, the Economic Community for West African

States (ECOWAS), in its 2008 Youth Policy, reaffirms the definition proposed by the AU. At a national level, many West African countries have adopted definitions of youth that are closely aligned with the AU and ECOWAS definitions, although only a few countries have ratified the AYC. In Liberia, a youth is defined as someone aged between 18 and 35 years (see Table 1 below). This could be explained by the complexity associated with capturing the definition of youth, including the longer time it takes for people to become economically independent on the continent. Ismail, et al (2009:25) add another caveat to this discussion by observing that the political context of most countries in West Africa, especially the violent intrastate conflicts, has hindered the transition of young people into adulthood.

**Table 1: Youth definitions in seven West African countries**

Country	Definition of youth (in terms of period)
Ghana	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Guinea	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Liberia	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Mali	15 to 40 years (25-year period)
Niger	14 to 30 years (26-year period)
Nigeria	18 to 35 years (17-year period)
Sierra Leone	15 to 35 years (20-year period)

**Source:** Ismail et al. (2009:25)

### Unpacking theories on youth

A cursory look at studies undertaken on youth reveals an emphasis on youths' sense of vulnerability, exclusion and marginalisation from society. These studies often present youths either as victims or villains. Krishna Kumar (1997:21) refers to some young people as the "voiceless children of war". In extant literature, there seems to be overwhelming conceptualisation that young people are in crisis –

an assumption that denotes youth as the vulnerable section of the population. Ismail et al (2009:25) describe youths in West Africa as being characterised by hardship, political exclusion and disenfranchisement. Perhaps one of the most renowned descriptions of how violence creates victims out of children is Graça Machel's 1996 study, which resulted in the UN General Assembly Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (UN, 1996). A sequel to the Machel report and subsequent review (2001) describes the ruinous effects of war on all children. Despite this landmark report's ability to highlight such sordid effects of war on young people, literature such as that has often resulted in the erosion of any form of agency from youths. Eyber and Ager (2004:189) therefore observe an emphasis on child and youth "vulnerability rather than resilience". Indeed, the recurring theme in youth literature has tended to largely portray youths as passive beings instead of active community members who possess agency to alter their social conditions. Such a narrative is determinist, as it usually portrays young people as a homogenous category that is isolated from the rest of society.

Traditionally, the 'youth bulge theory' has dominated literature about youths. A 'youth bulge' is defined as "extraordinarily large youth cohorts relative to the adult population" (Urdal, 2004:1). In the 1990s, German economist and sociologist Gunnar Heinsohn propounded the 'youth bulge theory', arguing that a large youth population is prelude to instability and civil unrest. Heinsohn (2008) further asserts that a 'youth bulge' occurs when a country hosts between 30% and 40% of young males from ages 15 to 29 years. In his 2008 opinion piece in the New York Times, Heinsohn applies the 'youth bulge theory' to analyse the post-election violence in Kenya. The 'youth bulge theory' was further popularised by American political scientists Fuller and Pitts (1990) and Jack Goldstone (1991), who argue that developing countries whose populations are 'youth-heavy' are therefore especially vulnerable to civil conflict. Proponents of the 'youth bulge theory' highlight that a burgeoning youth population poses a threat to peace, especially if youths are economically and politically marginalised. This thinking also asserts that young people, especially those in the developing world, constitute a vulnerable group with diminished life prospects, facing challenges of limited access to resources, employment and education.



Dominant conceptualisations of the youth perceive young people as being under threat or as a cause of societal crises. These theories highlight the linkage between youth and violence, and often foretell the likelihood of young people participating in various forms of violence including rebellion, warfare, gang violence, criminality and other kinds of aggressive behaviour. For example, the ‘youth bulge theory’ predicts the likelihood of violent conflict and instability if a society is characterised by a large proportion of unemployed youths. Perhaps the most-known theorist who sees youths as a ticking time bomb is political scientist Robert Kaplan (1994), who predicted youth-led violent initiatives in the contemporary world. Similarly, anthropologist Richards (2005), studying youths in Sierra Leone and Liberia, asserts that youths are likely to engage in violence as a result of the alienation of young people by state institutions, non-state actors and the private sector. Kaplan (1996:16) encapsulated his fear of the youth when he illustriously characterised male youths in urban West Africa as “out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatens to ignite”. In apparent concurrence with such virulent portrayal of the youth, political scientist Huntington (1996) argues that ‘youth bulges’ in Muslim societies have contributed to the radicalisation of the Muslim world. Huntington (1996:259–261) hypothesises that ‘youthful’ societies are particularly more vulnerable to war. As such, Huntington posits that the demographic factor must be considered when attempting to explain the radicalisation of Islam. He asserts that the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30 years. These assertions were confirmed by the Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2002), which voiced its concern of economic stagnation in the context of growing youth populations in the Arab region.

Studies by Madsen et al, led by Population Action International (PAI) (2007) and by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2007) respectively suggest a strong correlation between countries prone to civil conflicts and those with burgeoning youth populations. Against this background, Zakaria (2001), Ujeke (2001) and Wessels (2002, 2006) have reiterated the dangers of a rapidly increasing youth population. Urdal (2004) is convinced that youths are the epitome of the “devil in demographics”. Urdal (Ibid.) also adds another dimension – that of governance regime. Citing the

cases of Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Yemen, Niger, Togo, Iran and Jordan, he further advances the thesis that added to the ‘youth bulge,’ countries that are more at risk of experiencing armed conflict are those experiencing negative or stagnant economic growth (Urdal, 2004:17). ‘Youth bulge’ proponents argue that unemployed youths are more susceptible to militarisation and armed violence (Smyth, 2003; Sawyer, 2002; Sawyer, 2008; Rabwoni, 2002; Parsons, 2004; UNICEF, 2005; Urdal, 2006). Sawyer (2002) concurs with the ‘youth bulge theory’ when he discusses the ‘crisis of youth’ as an attribute that curtails the attainment of lasting peace in the Mano River region of West Africa. Predictions of the ‘youth bulge theory’ are compounded by the reality that “while young people constitute a majority of the population in some countries, their majority status is not reflected in the distribution of recognition, access to education/employment or their economic/political position in relation to other groups in society” (UNDP, 2006:75). Expressing similar observations, Zakaria (2001), quoted in Urdal (2004), argues: “Youth bulges combined with small economic and social change provided the fundamentalism of the Islamic resurgence in the Arab world.” Collier et al. (2003) reiterate that young unemployed men are prime candidates for recruitment as soldiers and or rebels in any civil war.

Apart from scholars, policymakers have also subscribed to the theories on the ‘youth bulge’ and ‘youth crisis’. The UN 2004 Report by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change points towards youth as a threat to security. The report identifies youth unemployment as both a cause of violence and a consequence of failed post-conflict peacebuilding, potentially leading to further violence. Similarly, the United Nations, in its 2004 and 2005 proclamations on West Africa and Liberia, respectively, reiterated statements linking youth and conflict, specifically highlighting youth unemployment as a prime condition for, and the cause of, violence. Overall, UN documents are fraught with assumptions that young people – especially those who are unemployed, uneducated, disaffected and marginalised – are a threat to peace and security. An observable theme in these reports suggests that without the generation of employment, young people are susceptible to violent activities and cultures of violence.

Another mainstream theoretical conception of young people is that of the ‘youth crisis,’ which frames youth increasingly as the cause and effect of societal crisis.

A 'youth crisis' is described as a situation where the transition to adulthood is blocked or shrunk due to various socio-economic and political challenges. This situation leads to the failure by youths to attain the requisite status of adulthood (UNDP, 2006). Thus, instead of the concept of youth being characterised by a transition to adulthood, it becomes what is described as an "enduring limbo" (Spinks, 2002:193), which is a source of immense frustration. Proponents of the 'youth crisis theory' emphasise how economic and social crises in many parts of the world are severely affecting young people by impairing their capacity to negotiate their transition into adulthood (UNDP, 2006). To make their case, the 'youth crisis' scholars point to young people in most of the developing world who are increasingly deprived of education and employment opportunities. They argue that uneducated and unemployed individuals lack the possibility of upward social mobility. Using West Africa as a framework for analysis, Kaplan (1994) argues that violent conflict and insecurity are directly connected to the presence of a large, unemployed and disaffected mass of youth. Richards (1996) employs the 'youth crisis' theoretical framework to argue that young people in Sierra Leone joined the rebellion as a way of demonstrating their frustration with exclusionary neo-patrimonial practices of the state. As such, the 'youth crisis' theory has often been used to explain the involvement of young people in violent conflict. Youth violence in Sierra Leone was attributed to the alienation of young people by state-centred development processes, a lack of educational prospects and a dearth of employment opportunities (Richards, 1996). Maclay and Ozerdem (2010) argue that many of Liberia's young people are disconnected from broader society and, in some cases, are being actively marginalised. They further assert that young people in Liberia typically have had little independence or agency over their own lives, and even less influence in the community around them. Analysing youth crime and delinquency in Latin America, Benvenuti (2003) argues that 'youth crisis' is a product of inept societal policies and structures. Benvenuti (2003:7) posits: "Inequality and impoverishment, further reinforced by neo-liberal macroeconomic policies adopted by many countries in the region, together with the incapacity of national states to address poverty and exclusion in the distribution of economic, political and social resources, account for the main reason for the proliferation of juvenile delinquency."

In a similar vituperative vein, youths have been labelled as the “lost generation” (Cruise O’Brien, 1986). Mostly, youths are presented as vehicles or objects of violence. Richards (1995; 1996) explains the increased participation of youths in armed conflicts in West Africa as being a reflection of what he labels the ‘crisis of youth’. A similar argument is espoused by Collier and Hoeffler (2002), who assert that often poor and marginalised youths have legitimate grievances against the state, which are often manipulated by political elites to create violent conflict. In Kenya, over 70% of participants in Kenya’s 2007/2008 post-election violence were youths (EDC, 2009). An Afrobarometer survey in Kenya (2008) concludes that youth exclusion from political processes represents the greatest push towards youth violence. Other studies have indicated the nexus between youth unemployment and youth engagement in violence and gang involvement (Mercy Corps, 2011). Similarly, in the Niger Delta, the prevalence of youth gangs and militancy is attributed to socio-economic and political marginalisation, especially related to the issue of oil and the resource control crisis (Ukeje, 2001). In Burundi, youth unemployment and poverty are cited as contributing towards insecurity in the post-conflict country, especially the ongoing incidences of banditry (Ngariko and Nkurunziza, 2005). A non-governmental organisation (NGO) operating in Burundi, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), warns that high youth unemployment poses a threat to society, as youths are most often vulnerable to political manipulation. Furthering the same argument, McLean Hilker and Fraser (2009:4) highlight that “where youths feel that existing power structures marginalise them, violence can provide an opportunity to have a voice”. Maclay and Ozerdem (2010:345) relay a similar message when they posit that “studies of Liberia’s ex-combatant population, and countless personal accounts from the war’s belligerents, victims and bystanders, lead us to the common but nevertheless disheartening inference that the war was fought mainly by youth”. The vulnerability and propensity of youths to conflict was highlighted in the UN Secretary-General’s 2001 Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, which observed that young, uneducated people are easy recruits for parties to violent conflict.

The pessimistic conceptualisation of youth among scholars is pertinently illustrated by Abdullah and Muana (1998) and Bangura (1997), who analysed

Sierra Leone youth experiences using the ‘lumpen youth’ thesis. The authors define a ‘lumpen youth culture’ as a sense of antisocial and anti-establishment orientation. These authors assert that the ‘lumpen youths’ are most often “in search of a radical alternative” (Abdullah, 1998:204). In addition, these youths are described as “largely unemployed and unemployable youth, mostly male, who live by their wits [and] have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or the underground economy. They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness, and gross indiscipline” (Abdullah 1998:208).

### **An alternative view on youth: the human agency framework**

Most theorising and analyses of youths in post-conflict societies have tended to focus on the challenges they face and the vices they present. These observations are inclined to view young people either as perpetrators of violence, as problems to be solved or as helpless victims of society’s structures and processes. While these conceptualisations are evidently informed by realities on the ground, they have diverted attention from the distinctive initiatives of peacebuilding and social change processes in which youths participate. What remains lacking in the current body of literature is a focus on the positive aspects of youth engagement in post-conflict societies. The obsession with youth victimhood and vulnerability, coupled with scant academic attention on the role of youths in peacebuilding processes, leads to unresponsive youth policies and programmes. Accordingly, this chapter embodies an emancipatory social analysis that seeks to view actors as independent agents of social reality, despite the existence of structural constraints and limitations.

Like scholars such as Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007), this paper reflects dissatisfaction with the mainstream perspectives of youths in post-conflict societies, which revolve around ‘victimology’. Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007:72) advance: “Focusing only on the vulnerabilities of young people is a limiting perspective that denies them the opportunity to influence their own lives and futures, and overlooks their insights, their rights to participate and their potential to contribute to peacebuilding.” Indeed, young people are active individuals, possessing assets such as resilience, curiosity, intellectual agility,

innovativeness, vision of possibility and capacity to help others (Apfel and Simon, 1996:9–11). Scholars such as Boyden and De Berry (2004), Argenti (2002), De Waal (2002), Sommers (2006), and Thorup and Kinkade (2005) now acknowledge the ability of young people to influence their fate positively. Given such possibilities, this chapter focuses on Liberia to demonstrate how young people are increasingly becoming proficient and resilient actors in societies that are constrained by post-conflict realities.

This assessment provides an alternative view of young people, which can be located in the human agency framework. Simply defined, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to think and act independently, make choices and impose those choices upon the world. White and Wyn (1998:317) offer an even simpler definition when they say that “agency is simply goal oriented activity”, which “involves attempts to modify, reform or retain aspects of the existing social order”. Agency is located within social relations (Anderson, 1980) and is shaped by structural conditions such as age, gender, ethnicity and class. Individuals that possess agency are those with the capacity to shape and work around the larger institutional and historical forces.

In contemporary societies, agency is expressed in various ways, including ‘active citizenship’, which refers to considerable engagement with key social institutions. White and Wyn (1998:318) articulate the three dimensions of agency – namely “consciousness of the potential to take action, the willingness to take collective action and the knowledge and wiliness to change social structures”. The concept of agency demystifies notions of ‘victimhood’ and helplessness, as it denotes the ability and capability of individuals to rise above the constraints of social structures, rules and situations to become vehicles of change. Human agency is a theory that is subscribed to by both sociologists and psychologists. Within sociology, the debate about the relationship between ‘structural determinism’ and ‘free will’ – or between external constraints and consciously chosen action – has become perennial. Sociologist, Giddens (1984) attempts to transcend the structure- agency debate by offering the ‘structuration theory’ as a premise for the analysis of human behaviour. The ‘structuration theory’ posits that human behaviour is an outcome of the ‘duality of structure’, in which human actors exercise strategic choice and agency using institutional resources. Bandura

(1984; 1989), a psychologist, postulates that agency is displayed when individuals exhibit more persistent efforts towards addressing their constraining condition. Agency is not only demonstrable in individuals, but can also denote collective action that is determined to impact on the social structure. As such, organised, collective efforts by groups, associations and communities such as youth groups, which are directed at the institutions in the public domain, can be labelled as 'agentic' behaviour. The human agency framework is useful in explaining how young people, who are directly affected by violent conflict and poverty, can emerge above these conditions to become active peacebuilders. Garcia (2006) observes that youth are a potentially powerful peace constituency.

### **Youth engagement in post-conflict societies: The experience of Liberia**

From the Soweto uprisings in South Africa to the anti-military protests in Nigeria, to the 'Twitter revolution' in Moldova and finally to the 'Arab Spring', history has demonstrated that young people are not innocent bystanders of social change, but that they are innovative, creative and 'agentic' participants in socio-economic and political processes. Youths in many parts of the world have evidently played progressive roles towards transforming situations of conflict, ultimately leading to the reconfiguration of political and social structures. In West Africa – particularly in Nigeria and Mali – youths were part of civil society coalitions that spearheaded political transformation in the 1990s, by resisting military regimes in their respective countries. Similarly, in the 'Arab Spring', youth activism had a positive transnational impact across North Africa and even extended to parts of the Middle East, such as Syria and Bahrain. In these instances, youths demonstrated that they could engage positively by challenging repressive regimes instead of being manipulated as instruments of aggression and violence. Evaluating the conflict transformation role of youths during apartheid South Africa, Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007:68) conclude that young people's "exercise of agency made a difference". The involvement of youths in the anti-apartheid struggle began with the Soweto uprisings in 1976, and the outcome was a loosening of apartheid laws. Reynolds (1998:45), also observing young people's agency in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, says that

youths chose “to take part in the struggle against apartheid”. She stresses that they took “profoundly serious political and moral decisions in relation to their own safety and ambitions, as well as the safety and interests of their families”.

The same perspective applies to youths in Liberia. It is agreed that civil war had a colossal effect on Liberia’s young people. The cumulative impact of violence and displacement decimated the livelihoods of youth and removed many of them from typical civilian life. Given the role of young people in civil war and its impact on this demographic, it becomes almost natural to cling to despondent conceptual frameworks. However, theories such as the ‘youth bulge’, ‘youth crisis’ and ‘lumpen youth’ are hugely negative in their conceptualisation of youths. They underestimate the youth and fail to highlight their role as positive agents of change and key actors in peacebuilding, both by policy makers and academics. The reality is that not all unemployed youths will become criminals or members of rebel groups, as youth initiatives in Liberia and other countries soundly demonstrate. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2006 report proposes that young people play active roles in social change as civil society actors, political constituents or participants in measures to redress violence. Indeed, there is evidence of youths transcending identities and background, overcoming structural challenges to become leaders in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Young people have declined to use violence despite the limited socio-economic and political spaces accorded to them. With specific reference to Africa, Nicholas Argenti (2002) observes that “the remarkable thing is not why some of Africa’s youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have”. Youths participating in violence reflect “only microcosms of the heterogeneous and multifaceted universe that, much for the sake of convenience, we call youth” (UNDP, 2006:18).

Increasingly, the UN has begun to acknowledge the worth of youth in the global socio-economic, political and security agenda. The UNDP’s Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) analyses how the UN’s interest in youth issues has evolved. The BCPR 2005 Report notes that in 1985, the UN General Assembly called for the observance of the International Youth Year to draw attention to the important role of young people and their potential contribution to development (UNDP, 2005). Similarly, the same report demonstrates the



UN's interest in youth issues by highlighting how the preface to the United Nations Statistical Charts and Indicators on the Situation of Youth (1980–1995) document acknowledged: “Youth, more than ever, are at the forefront of global social, economic and political developments.” In 1995, the UN adopted an international strategy, the ‘World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond’, to address the problems of young people more effectively, and to increase their participation in society. This strategy also provides practical guidelines for national governments and international agencies to improve the situation of youth and strengthen their capacity for effective and constructive participation in society. In the same vein, the UN General Assembly has also realised that young people represent agents, beneficiaries and victims of major societal changes and are generally confronted by a paradox: to seek to be integrated into an existing order or to serve as a force to transform that order” (United Nations, 1995). In addition, through its Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the UN has begun to develop a fully-fledged agenda focusing on youth, by elevating young people to the position of providers of solutions to global challenges. UNDESA acknowledges that young people possess innovation, energy, enthusiasm and exuberance, which makes it imperative to invest massively in programmes that focus on youth development in conflict and post-conflict settings. Other UN agencies also work closely with the youth or mainstream a youth development perspective in their work. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is specifically youth-focused and believes that if youth energy is channelled creatively, young people can become powerful forces for peace (UNICEF, 2005; 2009). In a positive conceptualisation of youth, Olawale (2004:3) points out that:

Young people incarnated the future and represented the promises of restored identities, as opposed to colonial alienation and postcolonial forms of domination and subordination. As bearers of the twofold project of modernity and the return to the sources of African cultures, they were called upon to promote and respect the political and moral obligations of citizenship and of political, social and cultural responsibility, with a view to constructing African democracies.

Despite the sordid circumstances surrounding post-conflict Liberia, youths in this African nation can be positively considered as agents of social transformation. Young Liberians are seeking to transform the neo-patrimonial and predatory social structure of their post-conflict state into an example of sustainable peace. Every day, youths in Liberia generate livelihoods and participate in social change processes, on their own volition or with support from state and non-state actors. The initiatives undertaken by these youths challenge the well-engrained portrait of unemployed, idle and disgruntled Liberian youth who are likely to become future recruits for combat. Amidst the 85% unemployment rate in Liberia, youths nonetheless engage in activities geared towards socio-economic advancement, mostly within the informal sector. One popular occupation of an average Liberian youth is what is termed 'hustling'. Literally defined, hustling means "capitalizing on every opportunity to procure a good or a service to supplement income and symbolic capital" (Munive, 2010:331). Hustling, essentially, is a colloquial word in Liberia that is used to describe many types of informal employment which constitute the main source of livelihood for numerous Liberians. Hustling activities include motorbike riding for transportation, vending and other forms of petty trade. Although it is risky and unsafe, motorcycle taxi driving is a thriving business in Liberia that engages many ex-combatants and other war-affected youths. Munive (2010) adds that the very act of hustling – which is characterised by high levels of mobility, intense use of social networks and creativity – demystifies the conception that Liberian youths are static, and always waiting for change to come externally. Such inventiveness demonstrates how youths have developed creative responses to violence, inequality and poverty. Ismail et al (2009:53) characterise these initiatives as evidence of "unsung and unrecognized, domain of structures, actors and self-start activities outside of the state, the family and subsistence activities that young people look to for support, advancement and a sense of belonging". This observation acknowledges that youths are involved in positive social transformative activities, which is a departure from the way youths have been commonly depicted in extant literature. In a similar vein, Diouf (2003:4) posits that, "excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialisation and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents,

and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of national territories.” Despite the risks and limited sustainability associated with hustling, this type of work is entrepreneurial, enhances the livelihoods of youths and often sustains their immediate day-to-day needs, apart from securing young people’s places in Liberia’s society and economy.

Outside the economic realm, Liberia’s youths are increasingly involved in the public domain, including politics. They are slowly galvanising to use their huge population figures as a resource. Studies indicate that 54.6% of the 1.3 million registered voters for the 2005 election were youths, although those who actually voted were less (Jarwolo, 2007:13). Realising this inert power, youths in Liberia launched the Vote Your Future 2011 Campaign in January 2011. This multi-stakeholder campaign was designed to encourage voters under the age of 37 to register to vote in the 2011 general and presidential elections. This campaign included youth groups such as the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), Youth Action International (YAI), the Liberia National Youth Congress (LNYC), Tackling Poverty Together (TPT), the Motorcycle Union and Liberia RISING 2030, among others. Youths mobilising under the auspices of the Vote Your Future 2011 Campaign clearly reflect the realisation that they possess the power to transform Liberia’s politics positively. As a category possessing agency or free will, youths are acknowledging that they can reform constraining social structures by participating in the electoral process, thereby changing the governance landscape of Liberia.

Critics contend that the 2005 elections, wherein George Weah’s Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) participated as presidential candidate, were seen a new dispensation for young people. In fact, the fact that a young person was contesting was perceived as a vehicle for the upward social mobility of Liberian youth into national politics. Weah’s campaign was energetic and it succeeded in mobilising thousands of young people from a state of hopelessness into a popular movement that was geared towards the transformation of Liberian politics. The 2005 elections in Liberia also witnessed the participation of youthful political parties, including the United People’s Party (UPP), which was “essentially organized as a party of the dispossessed. Its founding leaders were young populists who mobilized support from the grassroots” (Sawyer,

2008:183). Members of the UPP were largely unemployed and underemployed youths as well as students and workers – its initial cadres were student leaders at the University of Liberia and Cuttington University College. The 2011 elections were similarly characterised by visible evidence of youth participation, especially during the campaign period. In 2011 elections, George Weah campaigned under the auspices of the Campaign for Democratic Change (CDC) and his major item on the election manifesto was the quest for jobs. This theme resonated with young people's concerns; hence the domination by youths in CDC rallies. Participation of youths in Liberian politics – as campaigners, supporters, voters and, to a lesser extent, as candidates – is a clear reflection of the shift of youths from being 'innocent bystanders' to active participants in social change processes.

The engagement of Liberian youths in politics, particularly elections, is not peculiar to this country. A study conducted by Ismail et al (2009) in seven West African countries (Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) revealed that over 70% of youth respondents expressed belief in voting as a way of influencing public policy through regime change. Despite the restricted political space and limited representations of youths in key decision-making, youths nonetheless expressed hope in their capacity to engender democracy and social change.

Youths in Liberia also demonstrated consciousness of the negative effects of politically motivated violence. A report by International Alert (2004) discusses how on 14 September 2011, Liberian youths came up with the National Youth Code of Conduct, the preamble of which reads:

Whereas, we the young people of the Republic of Liberia, representing the youth wing of various political parties, having closely followed recent incidents of pre and post-election violence in this sub-region and the threats posed to our emerging democracy in this new dispensation and, realizing that Liberia being our common patrimony, have resolved to adopt this draft code of conduct aimed at safeguarding our electoral process so as to ensure the sustainability of our fragile democracy in the ensuing 2011 presidential and legislative elections.

(International Alert, 14 October 2011)

Although, in the past, youths have been used by politicians to execute violence, young people in Liberia are increasingly playing a vital role in underscoring the importance of non-violence in this fragile post-conflict country. During the research, the author learned about existing initiatives by young people to promote peacebuilding in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. For example, the National Association of Palava Managers, a Liberian youth initiative, conducts conflict resolution and peacebuilding work in schools and communities. Similarly, the Liberia Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) also engages in peace education with various groups, under the auspices of the Youth in Peacebuilding and Governance. These youth groups are involved in activities targeting economic, social and political levels. In preparation for the 2011 elections, the Liberia YMCA hosted a forum on the theme 'The National Elections: Creating a Platform for a Peaceful Liberia', in September 2011. The aim was to encourage youths to participate in the elections peacefully – as voters, supporters and candidates. Similarly, young people's aversion to electoral violence was aptly demonstrated during the presidential run-off elections in Liberia, when a coalition of youth groups cautioned one political party, the CDC, to abandon a series of demonstrations it had planned to carry out, following another win by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. A report by the online newspaper, AllAfrica.com (28 November 2011), mentions that four key youth groups in Liberia – the FLY, the Liberia National Student Union (LNSU), the Mano River Union Youth Parliament (MRUYP) and the University of Liberia Students Union (ULSU) – deplored the planned demonstrations, saying that these would undermine Liberia's democracy and fragile peace. The youth leaders called on young people and student organisations not to participate in any demonstrations, adding that their participation would be tantamount to their being manipulated by politicians.

Young people's political participation in Liberia is also evident. Increasingly, Liberian youths have become active in politics – exhibited not only in their participation in national politics but also in their preponderance in social movements and human rights activism. Ismail et al (2009) explain the rise of youths in civil rights activism in West Africa as a natural outcome of the restricted national political space. Ultimately, youths have to find a platform

to expend their energies towards social transformation, and the civil society arena provides such a space. Another initiative reflective of young people's interest in political participation is the Liberian Youth Parliament. Supported by UNICEF, the youth parliament was established to ensure the active involvement of young people in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy decisions that affect them. Members of the youth parliament are voted for by both out-of-school and in-school youths in a nationwide electoral process. UNDP reports that the youth parliament is involved in initiatives such as advocacy and awareness-raising for children's rights. In 2005, it organised a one-day Child Rights Symposium, bringing together about 75 young people from Monrovia and surrounding areas (UNDP, 2006). In both the 2005 and 2011 post-conflict elections, the youth parliament played active roles in advancing the agenda of youth participation in politics and generating political dialogue on the engagement of youth and children in national and community development efforts. Through the Vote Your Future Campaign, in 2011, youths participated in encouraging people in registering for the elections, calling for non-violence throughout the electoral processes (AllAfrica.com, 11 July 2011). These developments in Liberia fulfil the observations by Ismail et al (2009), whose study in seven West African countries concludes that youths can utilise a wide range of political, economic and social opportunities – not only to unlock their agency and creativity, but also to cope with their exclusion and vulnerability.

One of the most often identified manifestations of youth conflict is the dichotomy between youths that exists along ethnic, ideological and political lines. Young people have the capacity to bridge these divides, and the most common vehicle is through interactions between various groups. This is why associational life is not only important but also quite common among Liberian youths. A culture of participating in voluntary associations is quite important, considering that post-conflict peacebuilding is dependent on the capacity for communities to bridge identity divisions. Peer-oriented and non-hierarchical youth civic associations are one of the most important vehicles for social cohesion, and it becomes even more important in a post-conflict society such as Liberia. Del Felice and Wisler (2007:24) propose: "One of youth's major contributions can be through peer group non-formal education. Young people and especially teenagers spend a lot

of time with their friends, and on many occasions they listen more to them than to their parents or teachers.” Although youths do not constitute a homogeneous group, young Liberians have highlighted their shared identity to bridge their dichotomies and rebuild broken relationships. Several peer-level interactions, youth-focused associations and youth-led initiatives that build social capital, communicate a sense of community and promote the concept of shared identity, are observable in this young post-conflict country.

Sommers (2010:325) acknowledges the role of these associations, asserting: “At the end of a difficult day of searching for work or some action, joining peers to discuss economic, social and political events at dusk is an important way for male youth to create community and belonging in huge African cities.” In Liberia, sports teams, motorcycle unions and voluntary youth associations are proving to be hugely valuable vehicles for reconciling previously broken relationships, strengthening existing bonds and bridging social and political divides. These youth-to-youth interactions have the potential to reduce the social distance between disparate groups, between individuals, and within society at large – hence the conclusion by Maclay and Ozerdem (2010:355) that “a denser associational life among youth could help tighten both horizontal and vertical social capital, as it would offer a more succinct and direct demand”. The same networking approach has been employed by youths in post-conflict Sierra Leone, who have also formed several community-based youth associations that provide support to members, facilitate social control, enable socialisation and strengthen the youths’ engagement with state and society.

Furthermore, Liberia now hosts several youth-led initiatives focusing on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Well-known youth groups that focus on peacebuilding include the FLY, whose programmes include capacity building aimed at strengthening youth participation in policy formulation and implementation. Another good example is a project called Leadership for Human Security: Peace Building Project, which seeks to promote and strengthen social and institutional leadership capacities to address conflict through non-violence. Youths from Liberia constituted the Mano River Union Youth, Peace and Development Forum, which was held in 2005. This three-day forum was part of the larger Mano River Union Peace Initiative run by ECOWAS, with

support from international agencies. Held in Guinea (Conakry), the forum brought together 48 youth representatives from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to “develop a framework for the formulation of comprehensive sub-regional programmes to enhance youth participation in reconciliation, reconstruction and stabilisation efforts in the sub-region” (UNDP, 2006:51). Also at a regional level, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) established the Youth Employment Network for West Africa (YEN-WA) in 2006, to “raise awareness and to mainstream youth employment as both a political and a security issue”. Observations of the author during a field visit in Liberia revealed that several organisations have also embarked on initiatives targeting core areas for youths, including unemployment, poverty, and limited education and training opportunities.

Realising that youths constitute a significant portion of the Liberian population, the post-conflict nationalist project in Liberia has increasingly situated youths at the centre of its plans for economic development. At a national level, the Liberian government has acknowledged the resourcefulness of young people in post-conflict reconstruction efforts through its policies and programmes. A good example is the 2005 National Youth Policy, which recognises that the concept of youth offers a potential unifying factor. In addition, Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) acknowledges youth engagement as one of the six fundamental areas for intervention in post-conflict Liberia. Furthermore, according to a USAID Report, a substantive amount of the Demobilisation, Disarmament, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Trust Fund has been spent on youth. The Liberian government, local organisations and international agencies have begun to craft specific initiatives that are targeted at youths. Rather than conflating youths with general populations such as ex-combatants, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the government has embarked on a blatantly youth-focused post-conflict reconstruction enterprise that singles out youths as targets of development initiatives. For example, the Liberian Emergency Employment Program and the Liberian Employment Action Plan both target a population defined as youth. In fact, Lopes and Pasipanodya (2008) surveyed post-conflict initiatives in Liberia and conclude that a third of these projects focus on youths. These developments are encouraging and will help in



demystifying the current perception of young people as victims and villains in fledgling peacebuilding processes.

## Conclusion

Liberia's decades of civil war and political instability not only destroyed lives and decimated livelihoods, but also witnessed the massive participation of youths as both vehicles and victims of violence. Just like many other post-conflict countries in the developing world, Liberia has a youthful population that can either consolidate or diminish its fragile peace. Nonetheless, this chapter has tried to deconstruct the perception of youths as victims and sources of societal challenges, which is epitomised by the 'youth crisis', 'youth bulge' and 'lumpen youth' theories. While acknowledging the exceedingly difficult task of youth engagement in the present Liberian post-conflict environment, the chapter recognises the organic and instrumental efforts in which youths are engaged in towards supporting long-term post-conflict reconstruction. The chapter has outlined how Liberian youths are attempting to climb out of poverty and political oblivion by addressing several challenges that confront them as young generation in a post-conflict society. In this respect, this conclusion does not endorse the ongoing debate on the 'youth bulge' and 'youth crisis'. Rather, the chapter argues that in Liberia, the engagement and active participation of youth in political and socio-economic engineering is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Although Liberia can hardly be pointed out as the best case study of youth engagement in post-conflict societies, the country has gone beyond the preposterous doomsday and victimology predictions of youth vulnerabilities and risks. Careful analysis reveals that there are pockets of youths in Liberia who have not responded to the post-conflict challenges of Liberia with violence, anti-establishment or criminality, as predicted by mainstream youth theories. Accordingly, this chapter has focused on the various ways in which youth in Liberia have renegotiated their transition to adulthood by searching for alternatives to the socio-economic, political and physical space provided by societal structures. The lesson is that there is a need to desist from focusing

on young people as victims, towards a more positive perception of youths as a resourceful community for peace and development. From a policy perspective, this chapter raises questions on the growing role of young people in post-conflict societies, including peacebuilding, political participation and economic engagement. Although this optimistic expression of youths as progressive and positive agents is admittedly at a formative stage, this chapter adds a voice to the emerging discourse on the potential role of youths in post-conflict societies. There is thus a need for further reflection, exploration, research, discussion and policy development on this important subject matter.

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# **‘When the choice is either to kill or be killed’: Rethinking youth and violent conflict in post-conflict South Sudan**

William Tsuma

When the choices are to kill or to be killed

Steal or be stolen from

Eat or be eaten

Then what can we do

When you are forced to sin to make a living.

*Emmanuel Jal, former child soldier in South Sudan (Jal and Lloyd Davies, 2009)*

## **Introduction**

The subject of youth and their role in violent conflict continues to shape African social science research; hence the need to initiate sustainable preventive measures as youth violence permeates every policy discussion in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The research has focused primarily on the role of youth either as perpetrators or as victims of violence. Several projects have linked increased youth engagement in violence to growing levels of illiteracy, rising unemployment and poverty. These neo-classical perspectives present poverty as the root of the problems that face the global south. In some regions, youth participation in violence has also been perceived as an attempt to escape from heightened poverty levels. Policy recommendations emanating from the above hypotheses have pointed towards the need for increased education facilities, employment opportunities and income-creation possibilities.

Although youth constitute a considerable demographic proportion in most African societies, their role in conflict and post-conflict societies needs to be interrogated beyond meta-narratives such as theories of ‘poverty’ and ‘unemployment’. It is not a coincidence that despite growing investment in youth programmes by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government initiatives on youth employment and other income-generation initiatives, youth violence is entrenched as a plague in most conflict-prone countries of Africa. Wealth and employment creation are vital development strategies and should be sustained. What requires further interrogation, however, are the political conditions under which education and other development strategies can serve the needs and interests of youth. In conflict or post-conflict contexts, for example, one key casualty is the social and political fabric, which gets destroyed during war or violent conflict, leaving behind remnants of disorder that only nurture and cultivate a prolonged culture of violence. Investing in traditional development programmes such as youth employment and modern education without addressing these complex socio-political disorders thus remains a waste of resources and time.

This paper initiates discussions on some of the socio-political factors that underpin youth participation in violence in conflict and post-conflict contexts. The paper uses the case of South Sudan to try and understand youth dynamics and how they interact with violence. The central question focuses on exploring why some youth in conflict or post-conflict contexts resort to violence. By asking this question, it was possible to distance any judgement towards the youth in terms of their involvement in violent conflict (voluntary or otherwise) by giving them an opportunity to provide their perspectives on the issue.

The title of this chapter, ‘When the choice is either to kill or be killed’, epitomises discussions with South Sudanese youth. While sounding disheartening, it was insightful to note that most of the young people reflected on their contexts and questioned the legitimacy of attempts to provide mainstream development solutions while their local realities threatened the sustainability of any ‘semblance’ of development. This paper links youth behaviour to contextual realities and the environment that such actors inhabit. It then raises questions on the effectiveness of development interventions that work towards strengthening

youth agency (i.e. income generation), when the surrounding socio-political structures threaten to destabilise capacity building. Effective strategies for integrating youth exposed to violent contexts or for preventive initiatives should address the socio-political and cultural issues that underpin and reinforce the culture of violence.

This chapter is structured into a brief background, setting the pace for delving into the environmental determinants of youth involvement in and vulnerability to conflict, and moving into the first section, which outlines a brief theoretical framework for conflict in general and conflict-prone countries such as South Sudan, and youth and analytical discussions that frame structure versus agency in understanding behaviour change. The second section of this study identifies significant environmental determinants that are, as it were, the *sine qua non* – necessary but not sufficient conditions – within which young people are forced to grow. The case of South Sudan is used to illustrate the interaction of youth with such contextual determinants. Finally, the third section draws some important reflections and conclusions, based on the analysis provided on the role of contextual determinants and choices available to young people in conflict situations.

## **Background**

The consequence(s) of two brutal wars between Sudan's central government and the economically impoverished South Sudan, combined with protracted periods of civil war and inter-ethnic violence, facilitated the breakdown of economic, social and political systems in South Sudan. The 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) established the eventual secession of South Sudan from the North in January 2011, and subsequent independence in July of the same year. Independence was a monumental achievement for South Sudan, which had unsuccessfully fought for self-determination for several decades, leading to the loss of an estimated two million lives and destruction of properties estimated into billions of dollars. The Khartoum government had systematically marginalised South Sudan since independence in 1956, in which the North legislated Arabic as the national language and instituted Islam

as the state religion and Sharia law as the constitution, despite the presence of animist, Christian and dark-skinned South Sudanese. The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) then sought to magnify the position of the South Sudanese populations vis-à-vis the conditions of the Islamic North, in terms of government development and social policies.

The history of Sudan exists amidst more developed northern people, connected to world trade through the Red Sea and Egypt, besides less developed and more isolated southern Sudan (Call, 2012). These complex socio-economic challenges and structural imbalances have complicated decades of hostility, civil war and violence in South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Some of these issues are unresolved and continue to influence the choices of South Sudan's youth. Structural factors underpinning the continued violence include an enduring culture of violence and a legacy of conflict; continued post-independence boundary disputes along the three transitional areas of Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile; as well as persistent remnants of conflict characterised by piles of small arms and light weapons (SALW) that remain in the hands of many civilians. Integrating the youth into post-independence South Sudan consequently remains an integral component of all post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

As consequences of conflict are particular to certain populations, any historical account of conflict in South Sudan would be incomplete without discussing the links to youth and child soldiers. Most armed groups, militia and rebel groups in conflict-prone societies, including sub-Saharan Africa, comprise youth, with some perceived as children of varying ages, which then legitimises the study of youth and conflict in South Sudan. Efforts to prevent violence and initiate recovery in South Sudan would automatically call for the reintegration of demilitarised youth into society, or transforming those who have grown up within this violent environment. The above situation remains a dilemma and continues to influence development and early recovery programmes in

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1 While it can be argued that this statement is generic, the decades of civil war in South Sudan present a different reality, which influences and shapes the social-economic and political landscape that emerges. Trying to understand such a complexity without grounding the context within those decades of 'lost' opportunity is a recipe for misplaced policy discourses (author's perspective).

post-conflict contexts. The next section tries to position the question of youth and violent conflict within the socialisation framework, which places the individual within their rightful context to interrogate how that socialisation then shapes behaviour and choices.

The nearly three decades of conflict in South Sudan has resulted in the militarisation of populations and widespread underdevelopment. Besides, the presence of SALW among communities continues to fuel conflicts, hence the need for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) as an important component of peacebuilding that would also prevent the reoccurrence of conflicts. With a population estimated at 8.26 million – with 70% under the age of 30, 83% living in rural areas and 27% of youth aged 15 years and above being literate (South Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation, 2011) – the presence of SALW poses a significant threat for peaceful coexistence among communities. For instance, it has been noted that the militia of Jonglei and Upper Nile states are armed civilians, often male youths, who seek livelihoods through cattle raiding and banditry. Studies (see for example Nichols, 2011) indicate that ex-combatants do not appreciate re-integration packages offered by DDR programmes given the lucrative incentives they enjoyed as combatants. DDR programmes have also failed to achieve desired goals due to scanty government presence insecurity in most pastoralist communities.

The Republic of South Sudan Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RSSDDC) is a national initiative supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), among other funding partners. Accordingly, DDR is a key component of South Sudan's development plan (2011–2013) and is seen as a crucial component of the productive allocation of financial and human resources and broader peacebuilding structures and processes. South Sudan has 12 525 demobilised ex-combatants, and 8 542 participants received reintegration support in 2011, while 1 281 with disabilities were provided with special needs support. Besides that, 219 children were released from renegade militia and returned to their families and communities in 2010–2011 (Nichols, 2011). In spite of this, an assessment of DDR indicated grave deficiencies in the programme, including a lack of transparency in registration of the target group to be re-integrated. There is also a lack of broad-based consultation

seeking to ensure a long-term development strategy targeting security and peace consolidation. The main weakness is a minimal understanding of DDR among participants, due to an absence of substantial public information or a sensitisation campaign.

There are great disparities in the provision of education between the various regions of South Sudan, and significant numbers of youth and adults have completely missed out on education. Moreover, the available schools lack the capacity to absorb large numbers of returnees and internally displaced people (IDPs), since most of the facilities are temporary structures, frequently under trees. More worryingly, many teachers never completed their primary education, while the process of setting up a specific education curriculum for South Sudan has been slow, and led to the adaptation of education curricula from other countries – without proper localisation within the South Sudan context. Although English is to be the official language of instruction in the South Sudan education system, many youth have only been taught in Arabic, and those returning from neighbouring Francophone states know little English. There are few secondary schools and post-primary or technical institutions in South Sudan, although Southern universities that relocated to Khartoum during the civil war are due to return.

## **Youth socialisation and conflict contexts**

For socio-cultural reasons, many young/child soldiers grow up to become men and women unaware of other existing realities of life. Most, if not all, have witnessed brutal murders, rape or the maiming of their loved ones, or have themselves participated in committing those acts. These generations are left with very bleak memories of what it means to lead a normal and peaceful human life. Normal becomes defined based on whose reality one believes in. Without making any generalisations, the process of engaging in violence could be informed by choice: there are those who are forcibly recruited, as well as those who join voluntarily – albeit with background socialisation into conflict, as is the case of some youth in South Sudan. Thus, a contextual analysis is needed before

branding youth in conflict or post-conflict situation areas as 'killing machines' or 'future combatants'.

The analysis of human behaviour and subsequent identification of particular factors that contribute to one course of action rather than another is inevitably a complex and somewhat unsatisfactory process. Seldom is any reality straightforward so as to warrant a distinct explanation. The implication is that several explanations, perhaps, are necessary to describe a certain reality. Moreover, different aspects of this reality could take on varying dimensions among populations, leading to a lack of consolidated perspective among target beneficiaries. Even though testimonies gathered in this study are complex and diverse, their voices paint a picture of the underlying and immediate factors that contributed to their joining an armed force or militia group.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter is adopted from a poem by Emmanuel Jal – a reformed South Sudanese child soldier – to help realise the harsh realities that youth living in violence-prone areas face. Significant tension exists between the 'praise' and the 'fear' of youth in sub-Saharan Africa, both in theory and in the way in which they are perceived by government institutions and international organisations (Auerbach, 2010:11). Youth, as a population category, are habitually framed in an indistinguishable 'black and white' dichotomy, and in conflict situations either as perpetrators or victims of violence and its aftermath. The tone and agency of the youth in negotiating their allegiances and socio-political citizenship in complex and nuanced ways is thus often overlooked or ignored altogether; the context that shapes their choices and action is often not reflected.

Various theoretical perspectives have been put forward to explain the linkages between youth and conflict. The 'youth bulge theory' is founded on the premise that there exists a strong correlation between countries prone to civil conflicts and those with burgeoning youthful populations. Societies with rapidly increasing youth populations are said to end up frequently with rampant unemployment, and thus large pools of disaffected youth are more susceptible to recruitment into rebel or terrorist groups. This presents a direct and positive relationship between burgeoning youth populations and unemployment – and



since it is said that an 'idle mind is the devil's workshop', youth become more susceptible to socially unacceptable behaviour in the absence of productive employment opportunities.

Antony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory opposes the perspectives espoused by proponents of the 'youth bulge'. This theory establishes the agency of individuals, defined as the ability to deploy a range of causal powers in decision-making, while structure is objectified as the rules, norms, resources and patterns of choice and power in society. Giddens argues that structure has the power to give rise to people's social practices, which are the activities that make and transform the world we live in (referred to as behaviour). Social practices are then defined by the structure (rules, norms, resources and patterns of choice) within any given context. In this case, the heuristics of collective lifestyles define the social, political and cultural factors that determine how people interact and relate to their context.

Borrowing from Giddens' theory, it is plausible to argue that countries with weak political institutions, laden with remnants of civil war or recovering from political disputes are most vulnerable to regressing into violence. If such countries simultaneously experience a growing youth bulge (which has been socialised within the same violence), there is a high probability that these youth would be manipulated by ideologies of war and thus become agents of violence and insurgency. The central argument is the way in which the youth are socialised. So, the argument that suggests that a huge youth population in post-conflict states increases the likelihood of continued conflict, does not necessarily point towards the concept of 'youth bulge'; rather, it suggests that the youth's context defines their choices and actions (Kagwanja, 2005:6; Simonse, 2005:243). If the country concerned has a history in which youth often served in the armed forces, militias or the military, then they are not only likely to be involved in violence, but also have the technical know-how required to 'ignite' war once again threatening the polity, the nation and order itself.

In the foregoing case, the youth are not necessarily a dormant demographic factor waiting to become active agents in violence; for the youth, conflict becomes "part and parcel of their identity and unfortunately, that identity shapes and

refines their actions and choices” (in this specific case, Liberian youth during the long civil war) (Utas, 2008:117). Acknowledging contextual factors takes away generalisations of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ and demonstrates that youth in conflict are complex agents negotiating a wide assortment of social, economic and ethical decisions (Ibid.). It is necessary to grapple further with this grey area and think through the ways that the youth adapt to various mindsets. These adaptations should not be conceived in a vacuum, but instead contextualised to understand better the ways in which conflicts affect youth psyche. Rather than assuming a paradigm of good or evil, or moral or immoral, the youth should be perceived to be constantly changing and negotiating their positions in society as means to survive within these underlying spaces. Constant change is essential to help individualise youth and make their engagement with social change a reality in a post-conflict society.

In South Sudan, those youth who become part of the militia, armed groups and rebel leaders felt victimised and humiliated during an earlier period of their growth and development. The majority had been exposed to armed violence at very early stages – either directly as prisoners or indirectly by witnessing the loss of loved ones. Such victimised youth could have also experienced repression, human rights violations, deprivation of basic resources and societal alienation. The resulting aggression from previously victimised youth appears to be a form of retaliation, deriving from feelings of past indignity and degradation. In this case, there is a causal relationship between the socialisation of the youth and the choices they make when placed in situations where decisions have to be negotiated. Within militarised conditions, there is also an absence of recognition and respect, which then creates divisions of ‘masters’ and ‘underlings’ in addition to feelings of humiliation and the abuse of core rights.<sup>2</sup>

As underlings rebel against oppressive systems in desperate attempts to rise to power through militia, and armed groups, they engage in extreme acts of violence, committing tremendous indignities and perpetuating the same cycle of humiliation to which they had been subjected. Revenge, even if not defined in those exact words, is present throughout hierarchical societies that have endured

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2 Focus group discussion (June 2011 in Juba, South Sudan) – with six youth who were former combatants and are currently unemployed.

violence, been subjected to civil war or even experienced genocide. When rebel leaders are in positions to vent their feelings of victimisation through violent actions, the majority of the population suffers as many are killed, wounded or exploited in ensuing conflicts.

After speaking to a former child soldier (identity withheld), it became apparent that many child soldiers grow up within an armed movement. The notion that children are captured from normal families and forced into the military does not tell the full story; rather, it blinds the realities of children whose parents are at the core of the rebel community and are thus raised in the movement. Of course, this does not negate the reality that child soldiers may have joined the rebel movements for protection, or were perhaps faced with a situation where joining an armed group seemed to be the only available choice. Emmanuel Jal's quote shows that the moral line of right and wrong erodes for many of these young people. The overarching story is of young children who are forced to commit atrocious acts against loved ones or face the threat of being killed, maimed or displaced. Child soldiers perform a range of tasks, such as participating in active combat; laying mines and explosives; scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards; training, drill or other preparations; and logistics, as well as support functions like pottery cooking and domestic labour. While some of these chores might be forced, evidence from South Sudan reveals that, in some cases, it is a strategy for negotiating their own core interests, which includes preserving their very existence (HRW, 2008:12).

It is important to nuance the discussion on youth and violence and note that, in many instances, youth do have agency in becoming insurgents – but what occurs is that the entire value and social systems become deconstructed and a militant psyche develops in their place to ensure continued survival. As noted in a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report on child soldiers, youth in conflict experience a process of asocialisation into "a polarized existence of hostility" and are denied the normal cultural, moral and value socialisation usually gained from family and community set-ups. Most societies have markers that determine the end of youth, whether through voting, graduation, marriage, bearing children or other rites (Van Gennep, 1960:65). Nevertheless, during civil war, social transitions are profoundly disrupted (Eyber and Ager, 2004).

Incapable of establishing these transitions in the normal societal manner, youth in conflict situations therefore miss the opportunity for societal reincorporation as full adults. As noted by Honwana (2006:53), when faced with a gun, adults always tend to surrender to the demands of youth, thereby relinquishing their claims to authority. Lessons learned during official DDR processes about the priorities and needs of children are often ignored by planners and implementers. The fear of stigmatisation and other obstacles prevent numerous children from registering for DDR programmes (HRW, 2008).

### **The South Sudan context in which youth are socialised**

The previous section highlighted some crucial theoretical and empirical perspectives on the complexities of youth socialisation in conflict-prone contexts. That discussion shows the relevance of theory in explaining socio-political behaviour, but also highlights the need for deeper analysis of causal relationships between certain key actors and violent conflicts. Actions are triggered, not inspired or nurtured. The popular assumptions made by most development-type institutions that the eradication of poverty would make the world a happy place need further interrogation; everyday actors are subjected to situations of negotiating their interests, which involves manoeuvring and outmanoeuvring existing social political and cultural norms or structures.

Through focus group discussions (FGDs), youths from various backgrounds engaged in mapping the social and political contexts in which they have been socialised. Some also described how these contexts affected their lives.

### **Civil war and the collapse of socio-cultural fabric**

The most important psychosocial cause of armed conflicts is the repeated marginalisation of particular persons or groups of people. As populations are excluded from the social, economic and political spheres, tension increases and marginalisation of any kind makes it easier for contending parties to cause individuals and groups to engage in extreme actions and become perpetrators.

During incidences of violence or protracted civil war, key casualties are the disintegration of the social and political structures of governance, decision-making and dispute resolution. Conflict thus implies that vulnerable groups are left to devise their own strategies of navigating difficult decisions or seeking redress when their rights are abused. In South Sudan, the choice to engage in cattle raiding and counter-cattle raiding has been attributed to the absence of any form of security, mode of socialisation or livelihood strategy. Therefore, the bottom line is that communities arm themselves as a strategy to guarantee their interests – one being their own security – while they choose to seek any form of revenge in the likelihood of an attack.

The collapse of customary socio-economic systems creates a decision-making vacuum and reduces the possibilities of addressing issues in a non-violent manner. The choice to respond violently to any perceived threat becomes a common occurrence, and youth therefore become the custodians of security. So, while the arguments of rationality and choice can be raised to question the decisions of youth, the other side is that rising insecurity, caused by disintegrated governance and security mechanisms, will always be a recipe for more violence.

### **Destruction of democracy and increased political instability**

The notions of democracy and political stability are tied to aspects of the destruction of justice and decision-making systems. The two [democracy and political stability] are closely associated with maintaining peace and preventing the eruption of violent conflict. The continued fragility of states is linked to the application of non-democratic tactics in governance, which marginalises groups and contributes to the inequitable distribution of resources. Non-transparent parties withhold or alter information on basic rights to serve special interests and, in the process, breach human rights laws. Such environments have the potential to serve as breeding grounds for violence.<sup>3</sup> The risk is that this exposes the most vulnerable sections of society – notably, the youth.

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3 Focus group discussion 2 (June 2011 in Juba, South Sudan) – discussing post-conflict democracy with five South Sudan youth who had dropped out of university.

In addition, corruption, extortion and human rights abuses are woven into the fabric of most failed political systems. The greatest misappropriations, however, occur in areas where the government feels no accountability towards its subjects. In South Sudan, a key effect of the protracted violence during the civil war was the destruction of established social safety nets. The outcome of this was that the struggle for survival turned dangerous as youth set out on desperate searches for food and resources.<sup>4</sup> In such instances, youth often received severe penalties for petty infractions, while no measures exist to challenge inappropriate judicial decisions, resulting in further marginalisation of young people. Mistrust is bred when neither the legal nor the traditional justice system can offer adequate means of settling disputes. Extrajudicial violence then becomes commonplace as armed groups and other rebel organisations illicitly control some security and justice officials to help protect their threatened interests.

### **Structural consequences of incomplete families<sup>5</sup>**

In the first two points directly above, the implications of violence on governance and democratic structures were discussed, and how these then create breeding grounds for violence. The family plays a significant role as an accountability structure for young people, and its absence increases the risk of youth to indulge or get absorbed into crime and other unlawful activities.<sup>6</sup> In most African societies, the family unit largely shapes one's identity. It also becomes a key casualty of violence if children and women are abducted and recruited as child soldiers or play other roles while the men are forced into armed combat. In some

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4 Focus group discussion 1 (June 2011 in Juba, South Sudan) – with youth between the ages of 18 and 25 years. Mostly unemployed, three had just dropped out of University of Juba, four had previously served in SPLA and four were reformed combatants engaged in small-scale informal economy activities.

5 I do realise the difficulty of defining what a complete family constitutes from an African context. However, my conceptualisation of this is leaning towards a 'complete' nuclear family, which comprises two parents (mother and father) and siblings. The simplicity of this conceptualisation is largely for reflection in the paper.

6 Focus group discussion 3 (June 2011 in Juba, South Sudan) – discussions on the social consequences of war, with a focus on the family (with six youths who currently head their families due to the loss of their parents).

cases throughout South Sudan, the well and able youth are recruited as militia, and because of the lack of accountability measures at family level, there is no wise counsel that exists especially for the younger generation.

Another dimension raised was that of identity. While tribal linkages have been politicised, their influence in shaping one's identity remains true in most African societies. People are identified according to their tribal and family lines. One can, therefore, argue that combined with the collapse or distortion of the family as a key unit of identity, the youth have adopted other means of shaping their own identity. Joining a famous rebel group of vigilante becomes their new identity and instils a sense of pride. The family also plays a central role in governing the behaviour of youth and, in most cases, provides accountability measures that then determine their choices and actions. When the family unit is destroyed, most young people then align themselves with armed groups and militias, among other conflict-seeking groups. While joining militias might not be their choice, the disintegration of the family unit made recruitment into armed groupings easier. Emmanuel Jal (Jal and Lloyd Davies, 2009) states that when you watch your entire family murdered in war, you lose the value of life.

### **Gun culture as a remnant of war in South Sudan**

A United Nations (UN) document on DDR warns: "If the possession of weapons is of cultural significance to the population and has been considered a habit that existed before violent conflict broke out, weapons collection programs are likely to fail" (cited in Brewer, 2010:9). Reducing the demand for weapons in post-conflict societies is difficult, especially if weapons are part of the civilian culture or are important for self- or collective defence in the absence of a trustworthy and competent police force and criminal justice system. Even if there is popular support for weapons collection, the way it is done determines its chances of success. Governments often respond to pastoral violence, such as cattle raiding, through politically driven, coercive measures of weapons collection. Yet, a community's weapons may perhaps be a deterrent to likely attacks by a neighbouring community, and removing them may invite violence on that community.

Collecting weapons without also reducing the levels of insecurity, crime and the roots of conflict at the same time can consequently disarm individuals of their means of self-defence in conflict situations. Legitimate security guarantees, or disarmament programmes in which arms are collected by an authority figure for safekeeping, are potential solutions. From a statistical point of view, the amounts of illegal arms possessed by civilians are quite astronomical. There are an estimated 1.9 to 3.2 million small arms in circulation, of which about 67% are held by civilians (Sudan Human Security Baseline Project, 2011) in a conflict that saw the arming of almost half of the current population in some areas, drawing a line between a combatant and a civilian is no simple task. For most youth in South Sudan, the gun is an easy weapon of choice, and violence is the 'preferred' means of resolving disputes of any kind.

### **Militarisation of public spaces in South Sudan**

The militarisation of public spaces of governance is closely linked to both the gun culture and the South Sudanese political system. The influence and role of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in the liberation of South Sudan has meant that the new dispensation is led by a hybrid military-political regime. The table below demonstrates how the military has preoccupied the public space. Research conducted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS, 2011) indicates that close to 90% of the governors in South Sudanese states are former military commanders. This therefore implies that the leadership process has created little space for civilian engagement. For youth, being in the military or being part of an armed group becomes a prestigious goal, as that guarantees one entry to the high office. In a country where role models are associated with political leadership, this then becomes an inspiration in the wrong direction.



**Table 2: State governors and their occupations in South Sudan**

State	Name	Rank/occupation
Central Equatoria	Clement Wani Konga	Major General
Eastern Equatoria	Louis Lobong	Brigadier General
Jonglei	Kuol Manyang Juuk	Lieutenant General
Lakes	Chol Tong Mayay Jang	Engineer
Northern Bahr el Ghazal	Nor Paul Malong Awan	Lieutenant General
Unity	Taban Deng Gai	Brigadier General
Upper Nile	Simon Kun Brigadier	Brigadier
Warrap	(Ms) Nyandeng Malek Deliech	-
Western Equatoria	Joseph Bakosoro	Colonel
Western Bahr el Ghazal	Rizik Zackaria Hassan	Brigadier General

**Source:** ISS 2011 and field work verification, June, 2011

### **Conclusion: Rethinking youth integration in post-conflict contexts**

This study has sought to generate investigative and practical knowledge on youth integration in post-conflict contexts, as well as to bring back the value of theory in shaping peacebuilding practice in the field. The case of South Sudan has been used to demonstrate that the environment or habitus in which these youth are socialised largely shapes the actions and choices they make. This chapter draws the conclusion that interventions seeking the prevention of violence have failed to yield the much-expected results – not because of design of the programmes, but rather because of the point of departure when these programmes are conceptualised. In terms of planning and shaping a way forward, there is the need for systematic synergies and links to be drawn between conflict and context analysis, as the basis upon which the structural and operational prevention of

youth-related violence can be instituted. These links would also determine the strategies for the effective reintegration of youth in conflict contexts. The main outcome of this study, which is consistent with many findings in behavioural analysis (Hart, 2010), is that young people throughout the world exercise choices in the formulation of both their identities and their actions, which often change according to their personal and socio-political contexts.

The effects of violent conflict are devastating to all members of a society – but for youth who are residing in conflict prone areas, the impacts can be even greater. Youth in post-conflict settings and those who have lived in 'peaceful' environments are almost incomparable. The psychological and physical trauma that these young people are exposed to is extensive, and can be felt in all areas of their lives. As opposed to viewing these youth as misfits, it would be more helpful to view them as active agents, constantly negotiating the spaces in which they live. Young people within conflict situations have much at stake, yet they have little say in the policies and activities that pertain to their lives, as these are often prescriptive and seen through the lens of outside stakeholders. The survival of the youth in conflict situations becomes a challenge, as they face the dangers of violence on a regular basis and develop coping strategies – which have been under-researched and misunderstood within policy discourses. Responsive programmes should bring the youth to the table in dealing with the effects of violent conflict, so that such programmes can be implemented with effective outcomes. The time has come for a complete deconstruction of the ways we have come to view youth who are involved in conflict. Rather, we need to contextualise the realities of their experiences through better engagement with them, to understand fully the profound psychological effects that war has on their development.

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# Conclusion

*Grace Maina*

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Within the greater theme of youth in Africa, a number of subthemes run across the different chapter contributions. The first is the discussion around the 'youth bulge' or 'youth crisis'. The youth bulge theory is based on the argument that developing countries undergoing demographic changes are more vulnerable to conflict. This is based on the presumption that larger populations of unemployed and unengaged youth are likely to be frustrated, which can subsequently manifest itself through violence. The theory furthers this argument by explaining that if young people are left without alternatives, there is a high likelihood that they will revert to violence to correct social and economic injustices. The chapter contributions cognisant of the fact that this argument could hold some truth do, however, also explore the opportunity that could find expression in the growing numbers of the youth population. Over time and through different examples, as evidenced in the different case studies, there is the recognition that with the right investment and programmes in post-conflict Africa, the youth populations can be our greatest opportunity.

It follows, therefore, that a fundamental argument across the various chapter contributions is a positive narrative in the situation of youth across the continent. The Liberia case, for instance, shows that youth have the power and potential to effect change. So whilst the challenges of a non-engaged youth are central to the discussions in this monograph, the positive engagements of youth in the different states are also discussed. The discussions here move beyond the victimisation of youths to the reality of them as agents of social change. The Kenyan illustration, though worrying in the larger discussions on the social contract, shows an example of young populations addressing governance concerns for less-privileged populations. Perhaps the answers to

better peacebuilding and reconstruction lie in the everyday engagements and expressions of young people in these countries. The presumption of their lack of agency and inability to define their engagement is possibly one of the greater mistakes that make youth engagement and governance ineffective.

Despite the recognition of the opportunity that a growing youth population represents, the bigger question is how that opportunity can be realised. This is the obvious reality that many post-conflict states find themselves in, characterised by huge percentages of poor populations. In such contexts, the question of how to harness opportunity through youth remains. The Sierra Leone chapter, for example, analyses the commitments made by different actors to engage and address youth, so as to mainstream youth considerations into the national agenda. The significance of youth and the danger of marginalisation, evident in the causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone, underline the importance of engaging the youth. It is, however, instructive that even in Sierra Leone the method to harness this remains elusive.

Another theme underlying the discussions across the different contributions is that of the manipulation of youth populations by the political elite. This is perhaps most evident in the Kenya and Sierra Leone case studies, where the youth are often used for violence and intimidation, and mobilised for blind support on the basis of ethnicity. What is interesting is that the violence associated with the youth in these case studies is, more often than not, the result of manipulation by one actor or individual. Poverty and survival politics continue to dominate the reasons why many young people find themselves constantly used to inflict violence and cause havoc in their societies. The reality of this manipulation by political elites cannot be understated.

Discussions around the context of youth are paramount. An argument made in the context of South Sudan is that the youth populations are the products of the environments in which they live. The daunting reality of everyday life continues to threaten the very attempts of development, and the attitudes and actions of youth populations continue to be defined by this reality. In such cases, the engagement of youth must be contextualised within that reality. The on-going dilemma, of course, is how the urgency of addressing youth can be tackled

within the long-term endeavours of peacebuilding. A prevailing argument in all the chapters has been that effective strategies for engaging the youth must focus on the structures and the culture of violence that characterise the lives of many youths.

An interesting argument made in the different contributions is that the challenges of youth are closely interlinked with the root causes of any conflict. The problems of youth cannot be separated from the challenges that continue to plague the post-conflict states discussed in this monograph. The nature of marginalisation, prevalent in so many African states, needs to be addressed if solutions are to be found. An important contribution made in this monograph is the discussion around the on-going domination of power structures by an 'older elite' at the exclusion of young people. Discussions of peace and the maintenance of it will require the participation and inclusion of the younger generations.

Governance continues to be a challenge, as is evidenced in the different studies. Related to the challenge of governance is that of security, with huge segments of the population struggling for physical, economic and social security. In addition, there are the issues of service delivery and the custodian role of the state. Across the different case studies, it is evident that there is the need to engage a more holistic pattern of reconstruction that seeks to engage youth in the contexts of their environment, if meaningful and sustainable opportunities are to be realised.

Throughout this monograph there is a constant realisation that the youth are an important constituency and the failure to engage this population group is problematic. The challenge lies in how this could be done or in the inability to engage, but more in the lack of willingness to engage, by those in power. The failed commitments made by governments and the international community continue to bedrock the frustration of youth. The unfulfilled policies drafted to address youth, without including their voice, and the lack of continuous commitment to include this constituency are the greatest threats to ensuring a holistic youth population. There is need for a more rigorous commitment to understand and engage the youth for the sustainability and durability of peace in post-conflict societies. This work is one such contribution.



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