Promoting Greater Youth Inclusion and Participation for Better Peace-building in the Mano River Basin

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Executive Summary

For several decades, youth in the Mano River Basin were marginalized by their states which subjected them to social injustices that left them angry and disillusioned. The result was the involvement of young people in more than a decade of violent civil wars in the region. In as much as the war left the affected countries destroyed, the elites failed to appreciate the youth agency, especially within the post-conflict context and continued to exclude young people from both peacemaking and peacebuilding processes.

The policy brief seeks to draw the attention of policymakers to the implications of marginalizing, infantilising and denying young people access to socio-economic and political opportunities, which are crucial in ensuring they live in decency and dignity. It further proposes policy recommendations, which could be meaningful in identifying and addressing the challenges that young people contend with on a daily basis in the region.

Key Points

- Youth is taken to be referring to persons who are transitioning between childhood and adulthood, within an age bracket of 18-35. The lack of conceptual clarity of the term "youth" demonstrates the heterogeneity of the persons who fit the description, and the need to understand their differences, identity, needs and aspirations within a specific context.

- In spite of their resourcefulness and unique understanding of societal problems, Youth in Mano River Basin are being largely marginalized, infantilized and stereotyped. The factors behind their exclusion interact with each other (e.g. elite capture, corruption, nepotism and the unavailability of socio-economic and political opportunities) to reinforce youth's frustration with structural injustices. As far as peace processes are concerned, their exclusion meant a massive segment of the population was not involved in the peacebuilding process. This exclusion forced young people to re-engineer the social space, with some of them engaging in criminal networks, which signifies elements of fragility and the challenges related to addressing the historical legacies of the conflicts in the region.

- To address the challenges that young people contend with, four policy recommendations that speak to the need for young people to own and lead the search for answers to their challenges are provided. These include;

  ➢ The design and implementation of initiatives that would provide them with the voice, identity and recognition they require;

  ➢ Investments geared towards promoting education and employment opportunities that will reduce their vulnerabilities and enable them to live in decency and dignity; and

  ➢ The stemming of elite manipulation and the perception of corruption in the respective countries in the Mano River Basin.

Introduction

In a recent years there has been a growing consensus on youth/young people and their connections with peace, security and stability in any society. Specifically, policymakers have recognized that disenfranchizing, marginalizing and denying young people a place, voice, recognition and identity in their communities can lead to heightened risks of conflict and violence. On the other hand, their involvement and participation can prevent conflict and enhance the growth and development of their communities. Central to this is the willingness on the part of state actors to recognise the youth's agency and constructively engage them.

This policy brief draws on the experience and diverse perspectives related to young people in the Mano River Basin. All the countries within the Basin have experienced conflicts of some kind – for instance, from 1991 and 2002 Sierra Leone went through a violent civil war; Cote d'Ivoire experienced two civil wars between 2002 and 2011; similarly Liberia experienced two civil wars between 1989 and 2003; Guinea suffered from intermittent border attacks during the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. To observers, what was remarkable about these conflicts were not only its brutality but also how they were to some extent triggered by various structural injustices inflicted upon young people (Maxsted, 2003). It is evident that to date, the said injustices are often left unsolved, and it becomes increasingly urgent to find a solution to the countries' youth challenges to avoid a relapse to violence (Bangura, 2016; Bangura, 2017).

The brief provides a clear understanding of who is a youth, their demographic characteristics, as well as the negative experiences they continue to suffer, which usually serve as a push factor to violence. It also examines case studies in the Mano River Basin – specifically Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia – with the aim of identifying the opportunities available to and the challenges that young people contend within the post-conflict context. Furthermore, it presents a case for the mainstreaming of youth into the overall peacebuilding framework in the MRU, with clearly defined recommendations for policymakers.

Youth as a Demographic Group

Defining youth with an age bracket may be attractive from a policy and statistical perspective, but it often does not help to shape the understanding of the phenomenon. This partially stems from the fact that age brackets vary from one context to the other. For instance, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250 defines a youth to be a person between the ages of 18 and 29; for the African Union (AU) it is 15 to 35; while for the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development, it is 15 to 24. Further frustrating attempts at definition is that different cultures may interpret youth differently. In the West, for instance, the definition of a youth reflects an "individualistic understanding of development outside social context: youth is determined by age, not in reference to one's interaction with other people or event" (Schwartz 2010, 5). This understanding is often not shared in many rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa, "people regard childhood as having ended when a young person has completed the culturally scripted rite of passage" (Wessels & Johan, 2006, p.30). Thus in these contexts, a child soldier carrying an AK-47 may be regarded by local people as an adult (Wessels & Johan, 2006, p.29).

How 'youth' is being defined within different contexts illustrates a general observation that the term youth is socially constructed to describe someone - who is considered by societies as neither adults nor children: that, despite appreciation of their agency and personhood as well as the need to nurture it, they are also seen

as vulnerable, a drain of resources or even lacking good and rational judgement (Soung, 2011). If anything, inconclusive neuroscience experiments of recent years add further confusion on the meaning of "youth". Indeed, while brain imageries have shown evidence of unique brain development during the youth and adolescent years, individual brains differ enough that only broad generalizations can be made from comparisons of different individuals at different ages" (Soung 2011, p.433).

Despite the diversity of youth and difficulties in even understanding it as a concept, many policy-makers and researchers too readily see "youth" as a homogenous demographic group that could be further subdivided on the basis of colour, age, job, education, citizenship. This idea of treating youth as merely a population group - rather than as a collective of disparate individuals each with their own desires and circumstances – provides fertile ground for policy-makers to develop overarching statements on youth, with the most popularised being the "youth bulge" and the "demographic dividend" theories (Nandigiri 2017, p.116). By either brandishing the menace of youth or by hailing them as saviours of societies, these theories and their underlying assumptions present incomplete truth when they grossly disregard diversity within the youth population.

In the end, the inconclusive debate on how to understand "youth" may be, in itself, the starting point for understanding any youth issue: that youth and the impact they have is ultimately a social construction, one that invites so many perspectives that there can never be a universally accepted definition. This policy paper uses the youth age range of 15-35. More so, readers should note the importance of engaging young people in real, meaningful, and sustainable manner, such that one can devise specific interventions that adequately consider "the growth and progression of young peoples' lives, capacities and decision-making skills,

along with the external/contextual influences" (Nandigiri 2017, p.118).

Youth in Mano River Basin

When examining post-conflict societies in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Bangura (2017) argued that these countries face a high risk of conflict relapse due to the marginalization, infantilization and disadvantaging of youth. The marginalization started from the very beginning with the various peace processes: when youth were uninvolved and uninformed about the peace negotiations while peacemakers focused on power-sharing deals that did more to appease senior commanders than to address root causes of violence (Bangura, 2016, p.42). This ultimately led to the "re-emergence of the same elite networks and structures that drove many young people to participate in armed conflict in the 1990s and 2000s" (Bangura, 2017, p.1).

It was the marginalization of youth that laid the first seeds of doubt against the peace processes. Thus, the limited hope that they had was lost, and they were left with grievances and frustrations that have implications for the peace processes that excluded them. In Sierra Leone, rural youth are especially neglected due to the primacy of Paramount Chiefs and their patronage network. Specifically, the Paramount Chief system ensures there is a lack of accountability in political, social and economic management within the rural areas, and at the same time those that fall outside the patronage network risks having limited access to their rights. At the national level, youth participation is theoretically guaranteed after the establishment of the National Youth Commission (NYC) and legal requirements for all political parties "to ensure that at least 10% of their candidates for all public elections are youths" (Maponga & Abdullah, 2012). In reality, however, there is a clear lack of youth consultation and inclusion in even what is perceived to be youth programming, which

undermines the influence, participation and inclusion of youth in activities that could have been better used to transform their lives.

In Liberia, youth were excluded from socio-political decision-making processes– in part due to the significant mistrust from adults in power, and traditional emphasis on making youth "the subordinate to older family members, excluded from the decision-making processes in their families and the national level" (Woods, 2011, p.23). In Cote d'Ivoire, the tendency of the government to invest in employment projects during election times is perceived by youth as an apparent sign that politicians care more for their own political gains rather than youth betterment. The instrumentalization of the youth makes meaningful participation in decision-making processes ever more difficult for Ivorian youth (van Dam & Pouw 2017, p.14).

If anything, the exclusion from the political and social spheres are made more dangerous by retarded economic and societal development. Writing in 2018, Bertelsmann Stiftung noted that in Sierra Leone "half of the population lives in conditions of severe multidimensional poverty, which means widespread malnutrition, high infant and child mortality rates, low life expectancy, deficient infrastructure, a poor education system and insufficient availability of basic medical services to cope with tropical diseases, malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and, more recently, Ebola." (BTI, 2018, p.16). In this environment, youth suffer extensively from unemployment and lack of income opportunities; and as a demonstration of the multidimensional cause to peace fragility, clientelism and corruption became both a cause of poverty and target for growing youth dissatisfaction (BTI, 2018, p.4).

Pervasive poverty also exists in Liberia (poverty level of 63.8%, 1.3 million people living in extreme poverty and youth unemployment rate of 85%), with young men and women being forced into extreme coping measures such as prostitution and engaging in accident-prone commercial cyclist business (Maponga & Jormon 2012, p.166). In Cote d'Ivoire, though by 2017, the country has regained its reputation as one of the most vibrant economies in Africa, its long-term growth is still "vulnerable to such external risks as volatility in the prices of agricultural and mining products, climate conditions, global and regional security risks" (World Bank, 2018). In this context, young people "face precarious conditions in the labour market and have difficulties accessing paid employment…More than half of them are in vulnerable employment", with young women and people living in rural areas particularly excluded from the fruits of economic development (OECD, 2018).

It can, therefore, be said that countries in Mano River Basin have largely side-lined their youth in the political, economic and social realm. Two ramifications are important to note from a peacebuilding perspective. Firstly, economic deprivation can lead to a situation wherein the will to survive drives youth to secure livelihood opportunities by whatever means necessary – even if it means turning their back on a peace process they do not trust or doing violence that they know is wrong (Bangura 2016, p.46). Secondly, a significant level of socio-economic and political exclusion, coupled with lack of opportunities has negative implications for the growth and development of young people.

In a study on youth, peace and security, Simpson (UN, 2018) argues that "young people and youth organizations are actively engaged in different phases of peace and conflict cycles. They contribute to the prevention of the outbreak of violent conflict through early intervention approaches - build peace in situations of ongoing conflict - use their access to local communities to provide humanitarian support during escalating conflicts - (and) in post-conflict situations settings, and youth have contributed to consolidating peace through participation in formal and informal peace

processes". Simpson further highlighted the breadth of violence that youth peacebuilders have dealt with, the range of tools they use in their work, as well as the innovation and resourcefulness that they often displayed in their peacebuilding activities (UN, 2018, pp.9-10). Unfortunately, this potential is currently blocked as youth peacebuilding in post-colonial Africa is often frustrated by the unwillingness on the part of the elites to open the socio-economic and political space for youth, thus, denying them the opportunity to positively contribute to both their development and the development of their societies. As such, in countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, many youth are re-engineering the social space and are either spending time in local coffee booths or becoming involved in gangs and cliques, as they search for identity, recognition and a place in their societies.

Towards Greater Youth Inclusion for Better Peacebuilding

Writing on youth and peacebuilding, Obaje & Okeke-Uzodike noted "a conflict situation or violent conflict cannot be brought to rest, managed or transformed, without adequately exploring how the energy of its primary agents could be redirected for the attainment of sustainable peace in a society or country" (Obaje & Okeke-Uzodike 2013, p.6). To achieve this, Obaje and Okeke-Uzodike suggested: "using youth-focused institutions as a medium for self-expression and consultation by youths, thereby reducing the possibly destabilizing effects of their manipulation and use by self-serving politicians to foment violence in their pursuit of parochial political and economic interests" (Obaje & Okeke-Uzodike, 2013, p.7). In a similar vein, Woods (2011) also remarked on the importance of allowing youth to participate in community structures. This will "redirect public discourse to ensure their needs are incorporated into a broader community agenda. In turn, public leaders and community members would

become more aware and conscious of youth issues. The collective power of youth would be elevated, and they would be able to influence how youth rights are analyzed in society" (Woods 2011, p.23).

In as much as the suggestions provided by both writers are valid and should be applied, the arguments for the need and the mode of engagement of young people transcends merely including them or their needs in socio-economic and political processes. They have to be recognized as integral to their communities and like the elites and the elders, have their capabilities and strengths that could benefit their community. Essentially, the recognition of their capabilities and the willingness and desire by the respective governments and other actors in the region to maximise rather than inhibit them will go a long way in promoting peace, security and development in the region.

Key policy suggestions for governments and their development partners would be;

(i) Provide young people with the voice, identity and recognition that they require to be comfortable and confident in their engagement with elders and elites in their communities. This could be done by opening the socio-economic and political space, with investment in activities that will empower them. Additionally, the cultures, traditions and other common practices that infantilize and marginalize young people have to be discouraged with policies and laws instituted and enforced that protect their rights and welfare.

(ii) Identify the key challenges that young people contend with in their communities and work with and support them to come up with credible, sustainable and pragmatic solutions to those challenges. This could be done through promoting youth leadership initiatives that could be tied to national policies and

agendas that would promote the leadership and ownership of youth-related challenges in the hands of young people. This will enhance a meaningful and constructive relationship that will increase the confidence and trust of young people in the systems and structures in their communities.

(iii) Elite manipulation of youth has to be stemmed, with both youth and elites engaged in ensuring safe and conducive participation of youth in leadership and decision-making processes. Initiatives such as civic education and life skills could be essential in promoting a conducive environment for young people.

(iv) Investments in education, career pathways and agriculture will reduce the vulnerabilities of youth and provide them with the opportunities and options they require to live in decency and dignity. This will reduce the risks of them being involved in dangerous and nefarious activities.

For the recommendations above to be effective, the perception of corruption and elite capture has to be equally addressed, as they have negative implications for peace and stability in the region. Additionally, there has to be a conscious mind-shift on the part of elders and elites, with them regarding and engaging youth as partners in development rather than as a potential source of chaos and violence.

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Dr. Ibrahim Bangura is a lecturer at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. He has worked extensively in the fields of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, security sector reform, and sustainable livelihoods. Dr. Bangura holds a bachelor's degree in political science and history, a Master's degree in gender studies from the University of Sierra Leone, a Master's degree in international development studies from the University of Amsterdam, and a doctoral degree in economics from the Leipzig Graduate School of Management in Germany.

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