



POLICY BRIEF: BEYOND DIVIDING LINES

Youth-led Civic Engagement for Peace in Sierra Leone

- As Sierra Leone is recovering from its 1991-2002 civil war, the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and a fatal mudslide in 2017, it remains in a vulnerable situation though prospects for a sustained peace are better than they once were.
- Young people constitute about 34% of the Sierra Leonean population, and face a number challenges such as negative community perceptions, a lack of safe spaces for meaningful participation, and issues of poverty and unemployment.
- Nonetheless, many youth engage in a variety of types of civic engagement, including volunteerism, art-based peacebuilding, and political engagement.
- To support youth-led civic engagement in Sierra Leone, policy makers and stakeholders are recommended to improve general perceptions of youth and provide sufficient financial support and safe spaces for participation.

Introduction

Many of today's youth in Sierra Leone experienced a childhood overshadowed by the country's civil war. With the war ending in 2002 and the country only recovering slowly, they are coming of age in a country where 70% of youth are underemployed or unemployed, with limited access to quality education and persisting tension between different social, political, and cultural groups over power and resources.

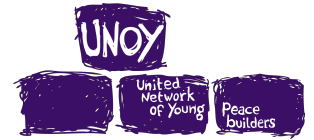
Despite the hardships faced by young people, a variety of forms of youth-led civic engagement can be observed in Sierra Leone following the civil war. This includes young people's innovative use of social media and hashtags as advocacy tools, organisation of educational and art-related activities, and their involvement in communi-

ty development work. Negative perceptions of youth as well and their struggles for secure livelihood may restrict young people's motivation to participate in such activities.

The key objective of this policy brief is to propose a number of recommendations to stakeholders in Sierra Leone to facilitate young people's engagement in peacebuilding by increasing motivators and breaking down barriers.

Context

The population of Sierra Leone is approximately 8 million, of which 35.5% identify as Temne and 33.2% as Mende, the two largest out of 16 ethnic groups. Since its independence from Great Britain in 1961, the Sierra Leonean population has experienced five coups, decades of single-



party rule and a ten-year civil war that lasted until 2002, leading to around 50,000 casualties. The authoritarian leadership and subsequent fighting that persisted from the mid-1960s caused dramatic damage to the socio-economic fabric of the country.

Sierra Leone faces challenges such as youth unemployment, political intimidation, regionalism, tribalism, corruption and environmental hazards. Recently, the country has been severely affected by the 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak killing more than 3,000 people, and a mudslide in August 2017 which claimed approximately 600 lives. These risks are undermining a fragile peace by generating conditions that amplify or induce tension or conflict, slowing down already ongoing peacebuilding efforts. Sierra Leone remains in a vulnerable situation, though prospects for a sustained peace are better than they once were.

It is important to note the country's commitment and its engagement in a number of key policy initiatives, such as the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS). Sierra Leone is one of the founding members and current chair of g7+, a partnership between conflict and fragility affected countries. In 2017, youth-led organisation Youth Partnership for Peace and Development (YPPD) Sierra Leone and the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) organised a national launch of UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace, Security.

Youth, defined by the National Youth Policy and the National Youth Commission Act 2010 as those between the ages of 15 and 35 years, constitutes about 34% of the Sierra Leonean population. During the civil war, children and youth played an important yet negative role in the war, acting as child-soldiers or leaders of militia. There were an estimated 70,000 combatants in

the civil war, of which approximately 10,000 were children. With the end of the civil war, many former child soldiers struggled to find their way back to their communities due to lack of support and a generally negative perception of youth.

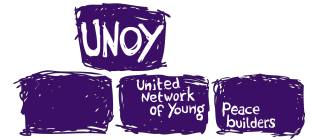
Youth-led civic engagement in Sierra Leone

Types of youth-led civic engagement

Despite the multiple forms of exclusion young Sierra Leoneans are currently facing, there are many examples of young people who have translated their lived experiences of the civil war or gang violence into a dedication to promote non-violence and peace. They show a strong willingness to be engaged in volunteerism service and assist people in need, as well as actively participate in activities that protect and safeguard the environment, both in rural and as well as urban areas.

Young people in Sierra Leone take up new opportunities and challenges, with an orientation towards innovative strategies and mechanisms. One example is the use of social media to mobilise communities and as a tool for advocacy, both on specific issues as well as on youth's participation in peacebuilding processes.

Additionally, a number of youth-led educational activities can be observed. The Students Peace Club, founded by students at the University of Sierra Leone who experienced the 1991-2001 civil war, regularly organises concerts, debates and workshops on issues of civic engagement, education and youth development. The youth-led movement Standing Together Consortium for Democracy provides voter education to first time voters, ensuring that they make an informed decision.



Art-related peacebuilding activities including the Artists for Peace music festival, as well radio and TV programmes such as Africa Young Voices TV's 'Youth perspectives' allow youth to be engaged in creative forms of peacebuilding and civic-engagement, have their voices heard, and foster dialogue.

"To me, preaching peace is a way of life, my vision in life is to liberate the minds of Sierra Leoneans from the negative past to a future that is happier, safe and peaceful"

Young man from Freetown, Sierra Leone

Moreover, youth are actively involved in community development and humanitarian activities. Established by former gang members, the Okada Riding group – a cooperative of taxi and motorcycle riders – is another example for youth-led civic engagement in form of income-generating social enterprises, creating employment opportunities for peers.

Boosters

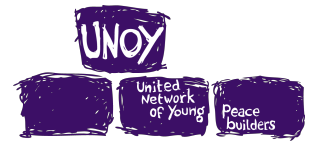
Youth in Sierra Leone want to be seen, have their voices heard, and be involved in the national politics of the country. They are motivated to promote non-violence through a strong inner drive rooted in their personal experiences, defying the challenges they are facing in their everyday lives. Many young Sierra Leoneans have experienced the civil war through forced displacement or were actively involved in it as child soldiers. In the face of economic challenges, only few received formal education. As many young people are facing poverty and unemployment, financial opportunities and capacity building opportunities for self-development are key motivating factors, driving youth who seek a

way out of the struggle to survive to actively engage for their communities.

A variety of external boosters have contributed to increased youth involvement in national issues. These include technical support such as trainings, scholarship and exchange opportunities (such as The YALI, Fulbright, CSP placements); support of the international community through NGOs (for example, the GIZ youth livelihood programme); and support from family, friends and the government. Additionally, the creation of safe spaces like youth forums, agencies, and the national youth commission are motivating youth to express their needs, allowing them to have their voices heard and to participate in decision-making processes. A key driver of youth-led civic engagement has been the establishment of the National Youth Service Scheme by the Sierra Leonean Ministry of Youth Affairs in collaboration with UNDP. Through this programme, 200 cohorts of youth service volunteers have been recruited to work in government, civil society, and businesses.

Barriers

A variety of factors are limiting youth-led civic engagement in Sierra Leone. Among the main barriers are poverty and unemployment. Lack of employment opportunities and the sheer struggle to survive limit young people's motivation, preventing many from assuming active roles in civil society. Challenges such as the Ebola outbreak and mudslides furthermore slow down economic growth, aggravating young people's disadvantages. Gang violence can be observed as another discouraging factor, as it draws young people to illegal activities and discourages trust relations and social activities in general. Police conduct is perceived by many young people as intimidating and biased, contributing to perceptions of insufficient security.



Another limiting factor are negative community perceptions of youth, which affect young women and ex-combatants in particular. Youth expressed they are often not taken seriously by their elders and discouraged to express their ideas.

Lack of recognition of youth as competent political actors by policy makers and limited governmental support for youth activities were identified as additional discouraging factors. Respondents feel decision-makers are driven by a reluctance to share power, fear of losing control, and lack of understanding on how to communicate with youth in a constructive form of intergenerational dialogue and to reach out to them as partners rather than beneficiaries.

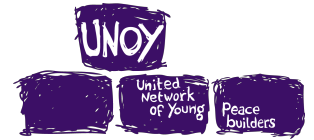
“Youths are only considered by politicians when it is time for election activities like rallies, campaigns and youths to serve as party agents”

Young person from Sierra Leone

It must be taken into consideration that limiting factors play out differently on different genders. Negative community perceptions of youth are discouraging young women in particular, who are often expected to nurture caring and reproductive roles while males are encouraged to seek more public roles. Additionally, barriers for young women to actively engage are early marriage, teenage pregnancy and school dropout, limiting their time and access to information about how and where to engage in civic activism. However, drivers are mostly the same across genders, with the only exception being the motivation of young women to engage in issues related to gender discrimination and gender-based violence.

Policy Recommendations

1. Governmental actors, importantly the National Youth Commission and the Ministry of Youth Affairs of Sierra Leone, and civil society organisations should collaborate to sustain and create meaningful spaces for youth participation that are not tokenistic, not damaged by tribalism and regionalism, and where true partnership and intergenerational dialogue for peace can take place. These spaces must be accessible for young women and youth with disabilities.
2. Sierra Leone’s role as co-chair of IDPS and its commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 2250 should be fostered and used as a springboard to further develop national strategies with regards to youth, peace and security.
3. Governmental actors, the donor community and CSOs should facilitate spaces for partnership and opportunities for young people to work with the local and the national governments. Specifically, youth initiatives should be supported with funding and technical advice, and bureaucratic procedures for registration of youth organisations should be eased.
4. To strengthen young people’s citizenship competences as well as youth employability, policy makers should work on educational reform and improve access to quality education (both formal and non-formal) with specific attention to young people in rural communities.
5. Security and justice systems should be sensitised about the work of youth-led groups and organisations, and enforce law without bias towards young people, especially during elections times when political tension is high.



6. The traditional and online media should be more committed to covering positive stories of youth-led civic engagement, to challenge fears and negative societal perceptions of youth, especially for young women as social norms often discourage them from participating.

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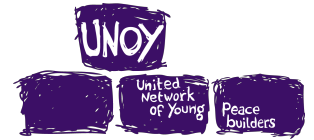
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Project description

This policy brief is based on the findings of a research carried out in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya and Sierra Leone in 2018 by the United Network of Young Peacebuilders. The project was undertaken in collaboration with four youth-led organisations – including Youth Participation in Peace and Development - Sierra Leone (YPPD-SL). Mamie M. Kanyako and Melvin Sharty, on behalf of YPPD-SL, conducted the research in Sierra Leone. This brief is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with support from the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), under the terms of YouthPower Learning, Contract No. AID-OAA-I-15-00034/AID-OAA-TO-00011. The author's views expressed in this brief do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

The team would like to thank Cordaid, the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS) and Youth Partnership for Peace and Development for the support and collaboration they offered for the de-velopment of the policy briefs.

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