

# THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES ON YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN POST-WAR SIERRA LEONE

In Sierra Leone, young people constitute about 34 per cent of the country's total 5.6 million estimated population.(1) The broad definition of youth in Sierra Leone includes people between 15-35 years old, of whom 70 per cent are unemployed and 53.4 per cent are illiterate.(2)



As a result, the lack of employment and educational opportunities has become one of the major concerns of the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL). In this complex context numerous local civil society organizations, together with the GoSL, have played a significant role in empowering young people, who were the most active players in Sierra Leone's decade civil war (1991-2002). According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report the conflict was caused by years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic

human rights, which created deplorable conditions for Sierra Leoneans. Amidst this context, most of the country's civil society organizations were established during and after the end of the war, aiming above all to empower minority groups including youth and women, monitor government activities, supplement human services and advocate for human rights. Hence, these organizations have given substantial support and hope to the country's post-war recovery and development, and to the improved status of youth.

## Civil Society Organizations in Sierra Leone

Today in Sierra Leone there are various civil society organizations that have taken up the youth issue as the main focus of their activities. Among them is 'Enhancing the Interaction and Interface between the Civil Society and the State to Improve Poor People's Lives' (ENCISS) which has been conducting activities at national, district and community levels in four major technical areas: Governance, Youth, Organizational Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy and Decentralization. ENCISS also works with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Development and Economic Planning with the aim of strengthening the GoSL's regional presence whilst working together with local councils to improve the Government's response to the needs of the people. In 2006, ENCISS supported a coalition of youth organizations in organizing a Youth-Led National Development Conference on 'Engaging Young People in State Planning,' which brought together 150 youth group representatives who met and discussed with Government officials on different areas of state policies. In this conference, young people had an opportunity to express some of their concerns, needs, and ideas to government officials prior to the 2007 general elections.(3)

The Youth Alliance for Peace and Development (YAPAD) is another important organization in Sierra Leone. Established in 2000 as an umbrella organization, YAPAD has been working on a wide variety of programmes, which are mainly focused on the following issues: integration of the most marginalized groups of young people including women and the disabled, youth living with HIV/AIDS, and those affected by conflict in society; and the coordination and facilitation of youth development activities to foster peace and reconciliation among the beneficiaries and their communities. As observed by Bockarie Enssah, the National Coordinator for YAPAD: "The social and economic conditions of the youth in Sierra Leone before the war were not good, which was one of the reasons that led to the war. Today, youths are still marginalized despite the 10 per cent of youth participation in the national decision-making process as recommended by the TRC Report. That's the reason why YAPAD has been organizing sensitization campaigns, creating National Advocacy Programmes for empowering youth's organizations to mainstream gender, disability and health issues within the decision-making process in Sierra Leone.(4)"

There are also other national non-governmental organizations working on youth issues, especially through the use of networking and coalition with community-based organizations, in order to address the nationwide integration of the most marginalized youth groups. The participation and inclusion of these marginalized groups in the national decision-making process is of vital importance for the peaceful development of post-war Sierra Leone. Among these organizations, the Sierra Leone Youth Empowerment Organization (SLYEO), the Centre for the Coordination of Youth Activities (CCYA), the Salon Youth and Adolescent Network (SaLYAN) to name but a few, have implemented, throughout the years, similar projects on youth empowerment in the country. Noteworthy aims and objectives for these organizations include the following: fostering peace building and peace promotion, respect for human rights that ensures rights for young people to develop their potential, training and coalition building, promoting livelihood and food security, promoting rights for people with disabilities and gender consciousness.

## Youth Empowerment Activities: Successes and Challenges

For the past years, civil society organizations in Sierra Leone have been providing vocational training to young people in areas such as agriculture, masonry, gara dying, tailoring, hair-dressing, mechanics and more. Through the participation in these trainings activities, thousands of young Sierra Leoneans have been able to enhance their employable skills and enter the formal and informal labour market, therefore acquiring sustainable livelihoods for themselves. In its 2009-2012 Youth Livelihood and Governance project, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) of Sierra Leone has already assisted seventy five youths to date. As

explained by Mr. Johnson, Project Manager of the YMCA Sierra Leone: "The specific objective of this project is to improve the socio-economic status of disadvantaged young people in Sierra Leone. Most of our training activities have proven viable economic opportunities to these youths. Moreover, we have already supported some of our beneficiaries to establish their own micro-enterprise businesses."<sup>(5)</sup> In conjunction with vocational skills trainings, some civil society organizations also offer adult education programmes, as is the case with the Sierra Leone Adult Education Association (SLADEA), whose mission since 1987 has been to help reduce the high rate of illiteracy in the country.

Nonetheless, in recent times it has become clear that most civil society organizations have been facing similar problems and challenges, such as: financial constraints (lack of funding), poor and inadequate resources to carry out their activities and an increasingly unfriendly perception of these organizations by some segments of society. Despite this, while the work conducted by civil societies in Sierra Leone has enabled the youth population to provide relevant services to their communities in areas such as sanitation and urbanization, it has more importantly, promoted the empowerment of the youth by offering employment and educational opportunities.

## Conclusion

The work carried out by civil society organizations over the years in post-war Sierra Leone can be considered of major importance given the fact that first of all, civil society organizations have been operating under a similar scope and with the same objectives: provide for the empowerment of the representatives of the most marginalized in society, youth and women. Secondly, these organizations have focused their activities on increasing the participation of marginalized youth groups into the decision-making process while promoting the respect of their beneficiaries' basic human rights. Therefore, due to the results achieved by these organizations we have witnessed a greater (re)integration of the youth into society and their consequent enhanced participation in societal development in post-war Sierra Leone.

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1 United Nations Statistics Division; available from <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=SIERRA%20LEONE>

2 Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (GoSL), "Employment for Youth National Programme," presented at the Sierra Leone Investment and Donor Conference (Freetown: 18-19 November 2009).

3 ENCIS Manual. "Join Hands to Work for a Better Sierra Leone;" Care International Sierra Leone. "Evaluation of ENCIS," Final Report, October 2008.

4 Interview by Isabela Leao to Bockarie Enssah, National Coordinator of YAPAD, Freetown, 29 March 2010.

5 Interview by Albert Kim Cowan to Mr. Johnson, Project Manager of YMCA Sierra Leone, Freetown, 23 September 2009.