

A decade after the Sierra Leone civil war, Freetown's youth are still living on hope

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Simone Datzberger is a PhD Student in LSE's Department of International Relations. Simone has just returned from Sierra Leone where she has been conducting fieldwork for her thesis which looks at the role of local civil society initiatives in the peacebuilding and development process of the country. During her stay she also had the chance to gain some insight on the situation of the youth in Freetown ten years after the devastating civil war. In this article she looks at the role of youth clubs in maintaining peace in the country.

Freetown – In the middle of a community near Belair Park, only a five-minute motorbike ride from the city centre, the daily challenges of poverty have led to the formation of a support organisation. In Freetown, necessity definitely begets ingenuity.

A club called *Street Life Family* (SLF) uplifts young men who have lost almost everything except for their dignity, hope, and each other. 'Together as One' is the motto of the club, which builds on the virtues of mutual respect, unity and team spirit.



A Wall bearing the SLF motto

SLF was founded in 2000 by Mr Ahmed Tejan Kabba – also known as Grandpa – under the initial name *Peacemakers*. SLF is not a political grassroots movement, rather it is an informal social support system for all of its members. Struggling with the consequences of the conflict and poverty himself, Mr. Kabba simply reached out to the youth of the community with the message: "Let us be together".

Eleven years later it is hard to estimate – even for SLF members – how many are a de-facto part of the club in which members often come and go. The core consists of about 50 young men who live either on the street or share a small room with a couple of other friends or members, sometimes at the compound or somewhere else in the nearby slums. Some of them have jobs, some are unemployed, some are artists or students and some simply describe themselves as "jacks of all trades".

Regardless of how they generate their income, all SLF members contribute what they can to the club. Every evening there is a big cast iron pot full of rice at the SLF compound, which members take turns to prepare. For some it is the only meal they will have in a day. But this is only a small part of the club's activities.

Some members do community work, such as building roads for no payment. In 2007, SLF even set up the Bomba Adult Education Centre without any external support or funds thus far. It is the brainchild of Alusane S. Dumbuya, a local artist, playwright, poet, narrator and cartoonist.

Within the international community, Sierra Leone has often been referred to as a success story in its process of recovery from a vicious civil war and its transition to peace. People are indeed tired of fighting. However, their frustration about slow development and ongoing widespread corruption remains.

Almost ten years after the war people still live from hand to mouth. In fact, 63% of the population has less than \$1.25 of disposable income per day. Current life expectancy is estimated at 48.2 years, almost half of the population are illiterate, child mortality rates are high and every fifth woman dies from preventable complications during birth or pregnancy.

Residents of the Freetown's slums told me that they feel that, in part, things are slowly getting better in the terms of road construction and electricity. Nonetheless, the latter is often unreliable and their core concerns remain unresolved.

Sierra Leone has one of the highest youth unemployment rates worldwide. It is estimated that approximately 60 – 70% of young people don't have a job or any prospects for a regular and stable income, and consequently a better life. Those who find employment discover that the wages are so low that it barely leads to a major improvement. Not surprisingly local labour units are weak – lacking capacity and rights.

How do young people cope with all these challenges, uncertainties and, most of all, the powerlessness to change their own situation? One major source of encouragement and strength are certainly their clubs. There are very few young adults in Sierra Leone who do not belong to a specific club or group. While some focus on leisure activities like dancing, music and sport, others, like SLF, are the only social support network they have.

While in Sierra Leone, I interviewed youths from different clubs and backgrounds. They all agreed that the clubs have been major contributors to sustaining the peace in the country.

"We [the club] have to be at peace with ourselves first in order to bring peace to the other communities," one SLF member added.

Yet, such a peaceful coexistence of all youth clubs in Freetown was not always the case.

In the past, gang fights or *beefing* took place quite often between Freetown's three major youth movements the CCC (Cent Cost Crips), the RFM (Red Flag Movement) and the Black Leos.

However, a ceasefire was declared in 2010 with the aid of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Local Government, Mr Dauda Kamara. Eight months later though, the members of these movements are beginning to feel disillusioned. In an interview, they told me they have heard nothing about support to develop their local communities. If their lives are not transformed in the near future, they do not exclude returning to *beefing*.

The reality is that the youth in Freetown are bubbling over with hope for a better life. But if their situation remains unchanged it is only a question of time before fights are revived.

"Sometimes I think God is just making a fool out of me," said a young man belonging to the RFM.

SLF grandfather Mr. Kabba is also very concerned.

"I don't want to see the youth lose their heads," he says.

Considering their past and daily struggles, it is absolutely impressive that the majority do not.