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Sierra Leone: Voices to the Youth – ‘We can see the light but we are not working’

LSE IDEAS

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Freetown – In the middle of a community near to Belairpark, only five minutes motorbike ride from the city centre, the daily challenges of poverty lead to the formation of a support organisation. In Freetown, necessity definitely begets ingenuity. A club called ‘Street Life Family’, in short S.L.F., 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. S.L.F. was founded, in 2000, by Mr. Ahamed Tijan Kabbah – also known as ‘Grandpa’ – under the initial name ‘Peacemakers’. Yet S.L.F. is not a political Grassroots Movement as such, but, an informal social support system for all of its members. Struggling with the consequences of the conflict and poverty himself, Mr. Kabbah 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 S.L.F. members – how many people are de-facto part of the club in which members often come and go. The core of S.L.F. though, 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

some are unemployed, some are artists or students and some simply describe themselves as ‘Jacks of all trades’. No matter how they generate their income, all S.L.F. members contribute at least a very small amount of their money to the club. Every evening one can find a big cast iron pot full of rice at the S.L.F. compound. In rotating shifts one member prepares the food for the entire club. For some it is the only meal they will have per day. But that is only a small part of club life and initiatives. Taking the road uphill Belair Park to Mr. Kabbah’s house one can see a handful of young men working hard to build a road with only a few tools. Everyone in the community knows that the funds to build this particular road were already allocated and then misappropriated twice. Now these young men undertake the job for free, earning nothing but the occasional tips from passing cars and motorbikes.



In 2007 and without any external support or funds thus far S.L.F. even created its own school called ‘Bomba Adult Education Center’. The idea came from Mr. Alusane S. Dumbya a local artist, play writer, poet, narrator and cartoonist. Lectures are held three times per week by Mr. Dumbya himself and other teachers. Everyone is welcome to join in – S.L.F. as well as non S.L.F. members. To their delight sometimes even workers from the streets of Freetown spontaneously come by and participate in classes. Lectures taught are about ‘general knowledge of all aspects’ according to Mr. Dumbya. One of his latest classes for instance focused on the ‘Lost Legends of Sierra Leone’. The key message of this particular class: Sierra Leone is not poor of natural, human and cultural resources, but, mismanaged.



Sierra Leone – Amongst the international community the country is often referred to as a ‘success’ story in its process of recovery from a vicious civil war and a transition to peace. People are indeed tired of fighting. Their frustration about slow development and the on-going and widespread

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

Talking to people living in the slums of Freetown they say that they still feel that in part things are slowly changing to the better in the form of road construction and electricity. Nonetheless, the latter is often unreliable and their core concerns seem unresolved. While pointing to the flashing lights from residential areas in the hills surrounding Freetown Mr. Kabbah says: ‘We



can see the lights but we are not working.’ 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 better life. And even for those who manage to find employment, wages are so low that it hardly leads to any major improvement. Not surprisingly local labour units are weak – lacking capacity and rights.

How do young people cope with all these challenges, constant uncertainties and most of all powerlessness to change their own situation? One major source for encouragement and strength are certainly their clubs. There is hardly a young adult in Sierra Leone who does not belong to a specific club or group. The purpose of these clubs varies from dancing, making music to sports or any other social activities like contests or public events. Some clubs are for leisure activities only, others, like S.L.F., are the only social support network they have. Interviewing youth from different clubs and backgrounds they all agree that clubs are a major contributor to sustaining the peace in the country, in so much that they bring unity amongst the youth. One S.L.F. member adds that ‘We [the club] have to be at peace with ourselves first in order to bring peace to the other communities’. Yet, such a peaceful coexistence of all youth clubs in Freetown was not always the case.



A notable proportion of clubs in the city associate themselves with a specific movement. So, Central Freetown belongs to the ‘Blues’ (also known as CCC – Cent Cost Crips), West Freetown to the ‘Reds’ (also known as RFM – Red Flag Movement) and East Freetown to the ‘Blacks’ (also known as Kekeke or Black Leos). In terms of membership (thus number of local clubs affiliated to one movement) the CCC movement is the biggest one – followed by the RFM and then the Black Leos. Recently a new movement (yellow and black) emerged in the South-Eastern part of the town but the three other groups signal clearly that they still have to work on growing the number of members and gaining respect. In the past gang fights or ‘beefing’ as they call it, occurred quite often. Presently all the movements are proud of having established a culture of discussion and declared a ‘cold war’ between all the

parties involved. Negotiations were initiated in November 2010 by the CCCs together with the help of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Local Government Mr. Dauda Kamara. Each movement burned down their flags and granted the other group the right to spray their initials on the walls in the territory of the others. However, eight months later it seems that this peace process is built on a very shaky ground. Although Minister Kamara’s successful attempt in ‘gang fight mediation’ is highly appreciated amongst all groups, their daily frustrations persist. In a group interview with the head of the CCCs, a young man who calls himself ‘Gangster Number 1’ and about 30 other members it is made clear that the expectations of the Blues were not met. From the moment they stopped the ‘beefing’ in the streets they felt left alone again. No further signal with regards to support or help for a better development of their ‘blue community’ has since reached them. More concretely, if they don’t see their lives transformed in the near future, they would not exclude that the ‘beefing’ might start again. On top, the CCCs are not alone with their dissatisfaction. A group of students who belong to the RFM equally state: ‘If things won’t change for the youth in next 2-3 years we’ll go mad.’ Opinions differ enormously whether a potential re-occurrence of gang fights might constitute a potential threat to the peace process of the country. For some local Civil Society Organisations, it is a phenomenon that can be found in any other big city around the world, for others it can have a destabilising impact which shouldn’t be underestimated at all.

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 re-occur. ‘Sometimes I think god just fools me’, said a young man belonging to the RFM. and S.L.F. grandfather Mr. Kabbah seems also very concerned. ‘I don’t want to see the youth to lose their head’ he says in reference to the challenges and frustrations they face. Considering their past and daily struggles it is absolutely impressive that the majority did not.

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