URBAN YOUTH
AND POST-CONFLICT AFRICA
ON POLICY PRIORITIES

by Mats Utas

Youth in urban areas of post-war African countries lead lives that are not very different from non-post-war societies. In fact it is often hard to separate battle-hardened ex-combatants from street-hardened urban youth in general. In this context, youth is a social category of people living in volatile and dire life conditions rather than a group defined by age. It is people who are no longer children, but who have yet to become *social* adults, people who have been marginalized into what they see as a chronic state of youthhood. It is the number of *social* youth, not the number of an age-categorized "youth bulge", that poses a danger for stability in many African countries. This way of defining youth demands special efforts and raises special concerns when international donor communities create and implement youth-specific projects in post-conflict areas. Related to that, this policy note reflects on number of issues that will help improve the results of such projects through knowing and using existing social structures, including gender relations, the problems of social elites and the advantages of utilizing already existing systems of labor training.

Justice – I call him this because he is obsessed with justice, or maybe rather the lack of it, in current-day Sierra Leone – quite often comes down to the street corner with minor bruises and scratch marks on his face or arms. People tend to laugh at him because it is his girlfriend doing this damage to him. She is a few years younger than Justice, who is in his mid-twenties. Justice is a typical Freetown street-dweller, although not one of the poorest, as he at least has a roof over his head. His girlfriend is a prostitute who we hardly see, but we talk about her quite often. Justice does not want her to ply the streets at night, but when he tries to force her to stay home at night she fights him. It is not easy to keep a girlfriend if you are poor, he says. Among the young men on the street corner, we talk a lot about this. Many say they cannot afford to keep a girlfriend at all, and furthermore know that if someone with more economic leverage comes along one's girlfriend is frequently lost without battle. They also talk about the humiliating and unsettling fact that if they have a girlfriend she is most often a prostitute. It is painful to share your girlfriend with other men, they all agree. To make things worse, such girlfriends also have more money than they do. This fact helps to turn traditional gender roles upside down, turning the young men on the street corner into dependents. With reference to this, those on the street corner who fought in the Sierra Leonean civil war often dream about the days of the war, when they "controlled" their girlfriends and could frequently afford to entertain several at the same time. Today, however, they have been remarginalized into what they see as a chronic state of youthhood.

Sixties – his name stems from the fact that he likes to wear clothes from that era – is around 30. He never fought in the war, but has been living on the streets since he was 13. His grandmother used to work for the British Queen in England, but now she is an alcoholic. Sixties arduously tries to keep her off the streets. Sixties works as a taxi driver. This does not render much money unless one has his own car, but it gives him some social standing. He is well aware of the fact that to establish oneself as a man – at 30, getting out of the youth moratorium – he needs to get married and have children. As the only one in the streetscape, he manages to find himself a bride to marry: Sarah. Truth be told, Sarah's family doubts that she will ever find a "proper" man and Sixties is something of

Freetown, Sierra Leone (Photo: Mats Utas)

an emergency solution to finally get her out of the house. The wedding is a confusing event, where "street" meets "house"; where a rayray boy (street boy) marries a house pekin (someone still in the house – not gone astray), put in local parlance. A period of peace and happiness follows as they move into a small shed, nicely built by Sixties himself, in a nearby slum. But Sarah can't get pregnant, or maybe Sixties' dramatic consumption of weed has made him infertile. Sarah pretends to be pregnant, however, and instead of delivering a child decides to kidnap one (this story is too detailed for this space, but it is worth a tale in itself). When the story breaks, it is front-page news in the Freetonian papers. It leaves Sixties totally humiliated, and he turns mentally off for some time. However, Sixties is strong and manages to get his act together, and has currently found himself a new woman he intends to marry.

These are just two short stories from a street corner in downtown Freetown, Sierra Leone, with the ironic name of Pentagon. I spent two years here, doing fieldwork, or deep hanging out, as Clifford Geertz would like to call it. This was a few years after the end of the civil war that had ravaged the country for about ten years. Currently in Freetown there are hundreds of street corners like Pentagon, with thousands of predominantly young men trying to make do in the city. I chose a gender perspective on the two stories I just presented, but I could have given you access to the street corner through stories covering a plethora of other topics: for instance, how ex-combatants and non-combatants mingle to the extent that it is hard to know who fought the war and who did not – in many ways pointing out that it is not necessary to place these populations into distinct categories. I could also show you how fighters from all fighting factions during the war blend and work together in an area like Pentagon. Although one will eventually hear that this or that person fought for the RUF in a slightly derogatory way, it is more a form of mocking and today it hardly matters who fought against whom – currently, just as it was prior to the war, it is the fight against poverty and for survival that matters.

Pentagon is about survival work, but also survival crime. And it is obvious that the two are not easily separated in practice. A central tenet for Pentagon is social security. Pentagon is a social safety net, a gathering of poor people helping each other because they know their state has neither the capacity nor the will to do so. People gather in associations like Pentagon car washers, Osusu saving

associations (the generic local form of micro-finance) or popular masquerade societies. Membership in such social clubs is, more than anything, a form of social security arrangement, filling the void created by the Sierra Leonean state. If you are ill the social club will assist you, and if you are arrested by the police – an all too frequent occurrence in Freetown – they will also assist you. I could discuss the police at length. People on the street do not see them as a force for good but rather as a force of looters from whom they need protection.

Street life is a fragile form of survival, and death is ever-present. But there is also a social form of death – the feeling of having no social worth, being devoid of social value (as discussed by Ghassan Hage and others). This is constantly pointed out on the street corners of Freetown, and it is a feeling acute enough to make a person join a revolution, to take up arms and become a rebel soldier, or to become a religious radical. But there is some hope. One of the advantages of doing research on a specific community for an extended period of time – in my case for two years and then subsequent follow-up trips – is that you can observe changes; changes the Pentagon guys themselves hardly observe. People on the street corner do move up the social ladder; they leave the street corner and get out of abject poverty. But the process is slow – too slow.

I cannot do scientific justice to any of these subjects in this short note, but can just point out that I have published and continue to publish on these matters, focusing on both Sierra Leone and Liberia. Instead, I will locate what I see as future research priorities and subsequently what I see as policy implications that ought to drive practical work and aid projects forward.

My findings place youth in the urban landscape of post-war societies, but I hasten to say that many of these findings fit no-war/pre-war societies just as well. A question researchers have spent a great deal of time on over the past ten years or so is the definition of youth. Does it make sense to give it an age bracket only? Are we really talking about a gendered definition, only including men? Many answers have already been given in a rich body of academic literature, but so far few conclusions have sieved into policy and capacity-building projects aimed at youth. Definitions of youth, partly as a political category and partly as an aid category, are constructed upon structural needs and thus differ from setting to setting. In West Africa, people fitting the emic category of youth are predominantly male and a large portion is over 25 years of age. Approximately 80% of those labeled youth in Freetown are male. Recall, for instance, Sixties being categorized as a youth whilst his wife Sarah, who was a few years younger, was not. Although still labeled house pekin (house child), she was not seen as a youth. This does not mean that young women are not affected by poverty, but in an urban setting such as Freetown most young women remain more socially contained than their male peers. It is quite clear that a definition of youth in Freetown is not gendered as such – recall that Justice's girlfriend is clearly defined as youth – and is not bracketed off by an age definition, but is rather a social category of people living in volatile and dire life conditions; people

who are no longer children, but who have yet to become social adults. It is the number of social youth, not the number of an age-categorized "youth bulge", that poses a danger for stability in many African countries.

Danny Hoffman has suggested that we should see the city as a form of barracks. Young people venture from rural areas – near and far – into the city to look for jobs. Many stay in the city for years doing survival work, waiting for a job that may well take them back to the countryside. Although the city certainly has quite a lure for young people, many are still very realistic about their limited life prospects and do not just go to the city to find the good life, as popular images suggest. Most have clear goals in mind. Indeed, young urban migrants may become enrolled in rebel armies or become mercenaries in foreign countries, but they are more frequently employed by plantations or mining endeavors in the countryside. They have one thing in common: they are most frequently hired in the city. In order to address this topic the right way, I propose that we need a better understanding of labor flows and employment structures from a contemporary perspective; however, much can be gained by studying the rich historical material that is available. More research in this field could lay a solid ground for international projects aiming to increase the possibilities for youth (with the definition discussed above).

Pentagon is a typical corner where labor is for hire; this is virtually the raison d'être for its existence. It is easy to see that the more destitute the youth become the lower wages they accept, and thus also the higher risks they are prepared to take. For example, from this perspective war is to be viewed as a calculated risk, a chance, in a socio-economic game. Waiting for chances, Pentagon-dwellers in the meantime do survival work: washing cars, pushing drugs, buying and selling goods – what is in Freetown without any prejudice called jew-man business. I recently, together with some colleagues, produced a film on the matter (Jewmanbusiness.com), and although we are quite a bunch of researchers looking into street life from a social perspective I argue that we need to know more from an economic vantage point.

Then we have the Big Men and their networks, which is a favorite topic of mine. I just edited a book on this topic, and although many of the chapters take more of a macro-perspective, there are some really fine chapters on Liberia and Sierra Leone by Maya Christensen, Mariam Persson and Anders Themnér showing how Big Men, both military and civilian, connect with foot-soldiers of the rebel armies, in both war and post-war societies. Still, though, we do not know enough. It is clear that street youth are far from loose molecules. In their current post-war lives, they are well connected with Big Men on a variety of social and political levels. In fact, these connections are often crucial to their survival. Wars should also be viewed in the light of Big Man networks of combined political and economic character. And here, without going into much detail, it is crucial to highlight that marginalized groups of youth do not start wars by themselves; people with political agendas do.

Freetown, Sierra Leone (Photo: Mats Utas)

If networks linking youth with Big Men are necessary for the youth's survival, they will not go away. Furthermore, there will always be a few Big Men who are willing to start wars to obtain power. If we cannot do away with these two factors, then the crucial point is to create salaried opportunities for marginalized young men so that they can afford to take fewer risks in the socio-economic game – to the Big Man with war in mind, starting a "revolution" should be too costly an affair.

A related point refers to the much-discussed topic of radicalization. Marginal settings like Pentagon are clearly breeding grounds for radical movements – it is enough to have a look at the number of portraits of Usama Bin Laden available on the street. Clearly, pictures allude to emotions of powerlessness and resistance, and quite often have no real political leverage, as is the case in Sierra Leone. As yet, the country is not close to any proper form of religious radicalization, but sociologically it is not very different from Northern Nigeria with Boko Haram, the Sahel area with AQIM and Ansar Dine or Somalia with Al Shabab. Youth may join different kinds of wars, but psycho-sociologically it is very much for the same reasons. I believe we can understand radicalization in, for instance, Somalia and Pakistan through comparisons with Sierra Leone. Freedom fighters of the RUF have many lessons to teach us – but we should not take it too far and lose what is obviously specific to a particular area with its particular histories.

Finally, I would like to suggest four interrelated priorities that should concern policy-makers and people working with youth projects in Africa:

1. Focus on marginal young men. Do this in a gender-sensitive way. After all, gender is not just women. But include women within the same socio-economic group as men. Urban youth are especially important. In much of Africa, youth is an extended period of time that cannot be bracketed out with a number. Youth is social age and, I argue, becomes a relevant aid category only in relation to socio-economic marginalization.

2. Related to this: Do not include all youth just because they have the "right" age. In Freetown, for instance,

the only time well-to-do youth meet marginal youth is when they venture down to the street corners to buy drugs. And it is clear: the two groups do not like each other. Elite youth will never be role models for poor youth – just think about our own society. Today, many youth projects have been hijacked by the agendas of elite youth. It is by all means important to prevent this. Rather, there is a real need to localize and get help from older people originating from the same slum dwellings, but who have successfully navigated through life. Here we may find real role models.

3. Youth programs need to be context-specific. They cannot and should not be planned in Washington, Brussels or Stockholm. An example I have given many times is that of an INGO that, prior to its arrival in Liberia, had decided to educate mechanics in rural Liberia. This was during the time between the two wars, and infrastructure was extremely weak and investments very low. Ex-combatants whom the INGO promised to aid in reintegrating into post-war society were turned into mechanics in large numbers, in an area of the country where there were hardly any cars and only a handful of generators. Was that a helping hand?

4. Finally, instead of creating new structures the international community should work with the existing ones. I believe there is good scope for a formalization of informal structures of labor. If project designers and managers could, for instance, more comprehensively understand and aid existing apprentice systems, and there are many, I believe youth employment could be significantly strengthened. So far there are limited amounts of systematic research in this area, but we are many researchers who could strengthen this with relatively little effort.

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