Article

Youth development, reintegration, reconciliation and rehabilitation in post-conflict West Africa: A framework for Sierra Leone, Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire

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Youth face distinct risks in situation of armed conflict and post-conflict. They are more likely to be recruited into fighting forces; become targets for sexual violence; need and lack reproductive health care, contract sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV; head households; be forced to generate livelihood for themselves and others; and miss out on education opportunities. [Guide for the Implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth. UNDESA: New York, 2007] Young people are susceptible to being used as perpetrators of conflicts and civil disorders, yet they remain the most vulnerable and the most affected in post conflict communities. However, young people are also the greatest resource to achieving reconciliation and reconstruction. This is because of the obvious reasons of their innovation, energy, enthusiasm and exuberance. It is therefore imperative to massively invest in youth development in post conflict settings in order to prevent reoccurrence of crisis and to ensure that their energies are channelled towards sustainable development. Wars in Africa are responsible for many deaths and injuries as well as for the displacement of many thousands of people. [African Union: The Status of Youth in Africa. Addis Ababa (2006)]. In 2002 it was estimated that wars were responsible for 310,000 deaths worldwide of which 53% occurred in Africa. While the causes of these conflicts remain largely unaddressed, their perpetrators capitalize on the energy, resourcefulness, enthusiasm and innovation of the youth to achieve their personal aims. 86% of the 1.76 billion young people aged 15 - 24 are in developing countries and it is estimated that 19% of these are in Africa in 2005. 60.7% million of these young people live on less than $1 US a day and 102.1 million live on less than $2US a day. In an environment of high rates of unemployment and rapid urbanisation, these youth are at significant risk for civil conflict.

Between 1990 and 2006 alone there have been several conflicts (intra and inter) across Africa. In Rwanda, DR Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Somalia, Uganda, Angola; Africa and Africans have been victims time and time again to these crises. Proactive strategies need to be taken on all fronts to ensure that both the immediate and root problems of these crises are effectively addressed. The key factors identifiable remain: corruption, poverty, high levels of unemployment, weak educational systems, unemployment and abject poverty. Important strategies to create jobs, reduce poverty and strengthen the educational systems should form the key goals to reconciliation, reintegration and rehabilitation in post conflict Africa.

In West Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea have all experienced conflicts in varying proportions. However, a common factor aggravating the situation seems to be the existence of identical ethnic groups across the four countries and beyond; contributing to the prolongation of the conflicts and to complex population displacements. In Liberia, the Mandingo and Kran ethnic groups from Lofa County, which formed an important part of the warring group in the country, have strong ethnic affinity with identical groups in Guinea and Sierra Leone. There is also an ethnic link between the same groups in the southwest of Côte d'Ivoire and the western part of Liberia. As people move into areas with similar ethnic groups, it becomes easier for armed groups to recruit people into their movements based on ethnic affinities.

The effects of conflicts and violence differ for young men and women. Some young men volunteer or are recruited as soldiers, but even civilian young men are more at risk than women for war and conflict related deaths. Despite the upheaval of war, young people do not loose their rights to protection embodied in the full range of humanitarian and human rights standards. Even in non-conflict situations, African youth may be exposed to high levels of community violence. The consequences

of this include mental health and behavioural disorders and the possibility of young people themselves being caught up in cycles of crime and violence.

The objective of this present paper is to: highlight the key challenges of youth in post-conflict West Africa; suggest priority actions to be taken by governments and their partners to improve the status of youth in post-conflict West Africa; and evolve strategies for reintegration, reconciliation and rehabilitation in post-conflict West Africa.

Challenges of youth in post-conflict West Africa

At the heart of the conflicts in the sub-region are widespread human rights abuses, which have left communities disintegrated, families dispossessed and individuals traumatized. In sum, as a result of the ongoing conflicts:

More than 3 million out of a population of approximately 30 million people in the sub-region have become IDPs and refugees;

Massive destruction of infrastructure and continued disruption of productive activities have left entire communities impoverished and incapacitated.[Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeals Process Strategy Paper for West Africa. Geneva: UNOCHA (2001)]

Women and children who form the majority of the displaced have suffered severe consequences on their health and nutrition, education and protection. Children have emerged as both victims and perpetrators of brutal acts. The youth have been robbed of the opportunity to grow up in conducive environments where they can learn the values of their communities.

More specifically, young people in post conflict West Africa have the following needs: rehabilitation and reintegration needs; resettlement needs; health care needs; educational needs; leisure needs; employment needs and participation needs. These needs listed are not exhaustive but are reflective of the immediate priority needs that should be addressed in post conflict settings.

The challenges of youth in post conflict Africa are not different from the challenges of all youth in Africa. Research has shown that [Mac-Ikemenjima, (2006). The Long Road to Banjul and Beyond: Process of the African Youth Charter and the role of youth in its popularisation and ratification. www.uneca.org/adf]: gross enrolment ratio into tertiary institutions in sub-Saharan Africa is 3.6% and compares poorly with other regions; public expenditure on higher education has declined steadily since the 1980s and remains chronically under-funded; 60.7 million young people in Africa are living on less than US $1 a day; the situation of youth unemployment in Africa varies across the continent, from 35% in Morocco to 27.6% of 18 - 35 year olds in South Africa; an estimated three quarters of the 12 million young people between ages 15 - 24 who are living with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa; half of the 300,000 child soldiers in

the world are in Africa and most of these young people have been forcibly recruited; young girls are subjected to sexual violence; and African youth have limited space to participate in decision-making and governance.

The African Youth Charter and the World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and beyond by the African Union and the United Nations respectively provide effective frameworks for youth development programming and policy making at the national level. Thus, these frameworks should be utilised holistically in youth development efforts. The MDGs also provide significant insight into what kinds of programmes governments should invest in, in order to eradicate extreme poverty by 2015.

The African youth charter has particularly helped in identifying the challenges of youth in various settings, and set priorities for action on various issues [Ibid].

On Sustainable livelihood and youth employment, state parties shall ensure the availability of accurate data on youth employment, unemployment and underemployment so as to facilitate the prioritisation of the issue in national development programmes and Promote youth entrepreneurship by including entrepreneurship training in the school curricula, providing access to credit, business development skills training, mentorship opportunities and better information on market opportunities.

On Health, state parties shall take measures to make available equitable and ready access to medical assistance and health care especially in rural and poor urban areas with an emphasis on the development of primary health care and institute comprehensive programmes to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS by providing education, information, communication and awareness creation as well as making protective measures and reproductive health services available.

On Youth in the Diaspora, the Charter calls for the establishment of structures that encourage and assist the youth in the Diaspora to return to and fully re-integrate into the social and economic life in Africa and Promote and protect the rights of young people living in the Diaspora.

On Girls and young women, the charter calls for the Introduction of legislative measures that eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls and young women and ensure their human rights and fundamental freedoms and ensure that girls and young women are able to participate actively, equally and effectively with boys at all levels of social, educational, economic, political, cultural, civic life and leadership as well as scientific endeavours. These are all important issues for re-construction and reintegration in post conflict Africa.

Approaches to youth development

The dynamics of youth development programming have continued to evolve over the last decade. Current approa-

ches to youth issues take into consideration the perspectives of youth in programme conceptualisation, planning, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. This has helped to ensure that youth issues are mainstreamed into development programming and that young people are actively involved in development programmes that affect their lives. Increasingly also, youth-adult partnerships are becoming institutionalised in other to ensure knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer and sustainable development. Various programmatic approaches are identifiable, however, for the purpose of this paper, only two will be considered:

i) Integrated approach
ii) Life cycle approach

Integrated approach

An integrated approach to youth development recognises that the resource that young people are, which in a supportive environment can provide a platform for young people to cope with multiple challenges that they face and to make a contribution to society. An integrated approach also ensures that the challenges and concerns of youth are included in the programmes and policies of governments at all levels. It is imperative to note that youth issues are cross cutting and thus need to be mainstreamed into broad based development planning include-ing National Poverty Reduction Strategies and National Development Plans.

  A comprehensive strategy that allows youth to engage in attempts to meet their basic personal and social needs to be safe, feel cared for, be valued, be useful, and be spiritually grounded and to build skills and competencies that allow them to function and contribute in their daily lives, is the most imperative in post conflict settings to ensure sustainable development [MAC-Ikemenjima, (Unpublished presentation) From Rhetoric to action: Framework for Rivers State Youth Summit, Port Harcourt, June 16, 2008].

Life cycle approach [African Youth Development and Empowerment: Sharing Experiences that work. UNFPA/AUC, 2007]

A more dynamic definition of poverty provides a different starting point for understanding and responding to specific issues of youth in poverty. Such an approach demands alternative concept of poverty as situational rather than necessarily inherited and likely to be associated with a short term rather than a life-long experience.

  Longitudinal data even if only from small but representative sample surveys, are likely to yield better information about the economic needs and prospects of individuals and groups at risk of poverty than large scale and expensive household surveys. Micro-level data will provide insights into the kinds of assistance that are likely

to be effective.

Investment priorities for youth development

The core challenges of young people in the region highlighted above can be addressed though initiatives that integrate the following proposals [Mac-Ikemenjima, D. Integrating the needs of young people into the second National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS 2). Unpublished presentation at the National Council on Youth Development, Katsina, Nigeria].

Investment priorities for education

Provide free and accessible primary education of good quality: free education is a policy in many African countries. However, this can be very difficult in practice. Free education should include: school bus ride to and from school, school uniforms, school meals and books for pupils.

Train, retrain and recruit teachers: In order to ensure that the quality of education provided is up to acceptable standards, it is imperative to ensure that teachers at all levels are trained and retrained and new teachers are recruited. This can be particularly challenging for post conflict countries but is achievable with adequate political will and mainstream investment from all sectors. This should also take into consideration the need to ensure that teachers salaries are paid regularly as at when due.

Review educational curriculum: Educational curriculum needs to be reviewed and take into consideration contemporary realities, particularly at the secondary and tertiary levels. These levels need to be tailored to meet the long term development priorities of post conflict countries. This will help to ensure that the youth study in specific fields that are linked to the jobs available in the job market, in order to ensure that they get employed after they finish their study.

Research, science and technology: Should be very important priority area for investment in post conflict settings, particularly in the areas of information and communication technology for development (ICT4D). Investing in science and technology research also enables countries to evolve innovative new solutions to problems and advance their technological base.

Invest in girls' education: Girls and young women are often the highest victims of conflict situations. They are mostly abused and raped and are hardly able to defend themselves. Thus special considerations need to be taken to ensure that the factors that inhibit the access of girls to education are effectively addressed in the educational system.

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Train skilled vocational and career guidance counsellors: Guidance counsellors play a very significant in an effective educational system, yet their functions and services are undermined by the gross lack of funding to education. Post conflict countries need to invest in providing training to guidance counsellors to ensure that they help to address stereotypes about certain careers and support the process of creating new jobs through insights that they provide to their clients on opportunities available in each career.

Create scholarships for deserving young people: Some young people with outstanding academic records and high levels of intelligence may not have the abilities to fund their education due to poverty levels in post conflict countries. Thus, there is a strong need to invest in scholarships both to local and international schools to ensure that these youth find the opportunity to develop in their chosen careers.

Promoting non-formal education: Recent emergencies have seen innovative programmes for out-of-school youth and for promoting the re-entry of youth to formal schooling. Such programmes have not been implemented on a systematic basis and have indeed been cut back due to general resource constraints. There is the need to promote the establishment of non-formal educational structures for youth, including young demobilized soldiers, girls and the marginalized, for example through accelerated basic education and vocational training for social reinsertion.

Investment priorities for employment

Employment often serves as a means of community participation, active participation in national activity, autonomy and independence. Creating jobs for young people will not only deliver economic benefits to young people but also maintain and help rebuild the environ-mental and social wealth. Decent and productive work for young people is central to reversing the devastation occasioned by war hence they must be given ample opportunities to find and keep decent work as a means of livelihood and personal development. The type of employment created must necessarily contribute to the creation of just and sustainable communities and rein-force the self-esteem and self-worth of young people. By these, the process of reconstruction can be set forth in earnest.

Support youth entrepreneurship: Special schemes should be created to invest massively in youth mentorship for young people seeking to establish private businesses. DPI has developed an initiative "Young Chief Executive Officer" which encourages young people to team-up or individually develop business proposals and they are provided with training, mentorship, financial support and monitoring to ensure that their businesses are successful. This model can be replicated in post conflict countries.

Provide an enabling environment for businesses to thrive: Government policies in post conflict countries should be such that protect the local markets, while also creating an enabling environment for all businesses to thrive. This includes the simplification of the regulatory environment. This is imperative to ensure that more and more businesses are established and young people find jobs, and are assured of job security.

Enact policies that protect youth in the work place: Governments need to put in place policies that protect young people in the work place and ensure that they get their due for the services they provide. UN DESA (2006) [Guide to the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth (2006). United Nations DESA: New York] recommended that: remuneration for young people is equal as for others and standards to protect workers should be maintained even in post conflict settings. Invest in public works programmes to use surplus labour for projects that may include upgrading infrastructure and improving irrigation systems, schools or health centres [Ibid].

Link education system to formal employment: It is imperative to create a link between the school and the workplace through specific programmes in order to guarantee immediate employment for young people. It will be helpful to establish formal partnerships with employers of labour to ensure that young people have internship opportunities during their school period.

Social entrepreneurship programmes: Young people should be encouraged to get involved in social entrepreneurship programmes that enable them to contribute meaningfully to society, while developing themselves. National Youth Service schemes are very appropriate in this respect.

Investment priorities for health and HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS continues to be a major challenge for youth in developing countries. In some countries across Africa, young people constitute up to 60% of national HIV/AIDS infections. The challenge of AIDS/HIV is compounded by STIs, unintended pregnancies, malaria and other diseases to which young people are vulnerable. There is need to put in place interventions that will effectively address these challenges and protect young people. entrepreneurship through micro finance, training and

Integrate HIV/AIDS into education curriculum: A more sustainable and cost effective way to address HIV prevention and education among young people is to integrate it into education curriculum in a way that helps them to learn and study details about the epidemic and score grades for being able to remember all that they

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know. Many countries have developed curriculum for sex/family life education which will be useful for post conflict countries.

Train and engage young people as peer educators to stop AIDS and pregnancy: Peer education programmes have become wide spread and have been a tool for HIV prevention in many countries. It can also be a potent tool to prevent unintended pregnancies among young people. Institutionalised peer education training should be provided to young people to enable them share knowledge on HIV/AIDS with their peers.

Youth friendly health services: Adequate investment should be made in ensuring that health services are tailored to meet the needs of young people and that such services are provided to young people in a conducive and friendly environment. Young people often face a challenge discussing issues related to drugs, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy with older or likely hostile health workers, thus adequate care needs to be taken to establish youth friendly desks in available health facilities to take effective care of the peculiar needs of the youth.

Strengthening the health sector: Will involve massive investment in capacity building of health workers, improvement of health infrastructure and training of new health workers to meet the ever increasing health challenges of these countries.

Childhood, infectious and other diseases: Investments should be prioritised towards the prevention of childhood and other preventable diseases. Adequate efforts should be made to provide insecticide treated nets to rural communities.

Investment priorities to meet participation needs

Youth participation in decision making processes is imperative in order to ensure that they get a chance to be part of designing policies on issues that affect their lives.

I. Include youth as part of delegations to international meetings and processes, particularly where issues affecting young people are being discussed.
II. Ensure that young people take-up leadership positions and are guaranteed seats in parliament and other decision making bodies at the national level.
III. Engage youth with specialisation in certain policy issues as professionals as appropriate to demonstrate that young people are able to deliver as professionals just like their adult counterparts.
IV. Develop a national youth policy and ensure that a national coordinating mechanism for youth bodies is in place for youth organisations.
V. Appoint young people as members of national committees or commissions on issues related to youth development and empowerment and ensure that their views and opinions are taken into considerations in the decisions that are taken by such committees.

Other critical interventions that are imperative to meet the needs of young people in post conflict West Africa are: Counselling, psychotherapy and community support for former child soldiers, special programmes to reunite families, food security, effective law enforcement mechanisms, particularly programmes that take into consideration the special needs of adolescents who are under the age of 18, water and sanitation, disarmament, peace building and resettlement needs of internally displaced persons as well as those returning from refugee camps.

3Rs (Reintegration, Reconciliation and Rehabilitation) for sustainable growth

Resettlement of displaced people has become one of the greatest challenges to reconciliation and reintegration. Aftermath of the conflicts, many fled their homes for safety and returned only to meet others occupying their abode or in some cases, their homes have been des=-troyed and traces completely obliterated. However there is need to ensure that these citizens of their father land are resettled and rehabilitated in order to prepare them for national reconciliation.

Reintegration and rehabilitation

I. Invest massively in low cost housing and provide affordable housing to citizens.
II. Review existing land policies to ensure equitable land distribution to all citizens both for the purposes of agriculture and for resettlement.
III. Institute a counselling/ psychotherapy programme to provide counselling and treatment
IV. Services to young people suffering psychological disorders.
V. Develop strategies to disarm young soldiers.
VI. Provide vocational and skills training for former child/ youth soldiers in order to keep them engaged in more productive activities.
VII. Treat victims of drug abuse.
VIII. Establish programmes to enable lost family members find each other, this can be done through the local media.

Reconciliation

I. Establish a national reconciliation committee/programme. Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a good example.
II. Put in place judicial processes to ensure that perpetrators of all forms of human rights abuses are tried and punished as appropriate.
III. Encourage leaders of each faction of the crisis to apologise to the nation in the interest of national unity and reconciliation.

Conclusion and forward-looking ideas

This paper has attempted to examine the situation of post conflict West Africa, with a view to recommending possible interventions that will improve the status of youth in the region. While four key needs of the youth have been highlighted in the paper, a number of very critical initiatives are important in order to address the sustainable development needs of these countries. Key forward looking ideas are also necessary to ensure that youth development issues are taken seriously in development planning in post conflict settings.

I. Integrate all youth issues across all ministerial/governmental departments;
II. Integrate youth issues into National Development Planning/ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers;
III. Organise a national youth dialogue to identify youth development priorities
IV. Establish a national youth peace corps which brings together all stakeholders in the country to educate youth on peace building and conflict resolution.