Please note: The opinions expressed in WNCAC meetings and reflected in these notes are those of the individual participants and are not endorsed by the WNCAC, which provides an open forum for exchange among those concerned with children affected by armed conflict.

The Washington Network held its Bi–monthly meeting on May 20, 2010. The conversation was framed by Marc Sommers, a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. In February, Marc Sommers conducted final field research for his book, *Marley's War: Terror and Transformation in Sierra Leone*. His book on Sierra Leone's civil war and its aftermath highlights the impact of pop culture icons on the practice of terror warfare and the lives of youth. He is also completing his seventh book while at USIP, entitled *Stuck: Rwandan Youth on the Road to Adulthood*.

Over the past two decades, Dr. Sommers has conducted research in 20 war-affected countries (15 in Africa) and published extensively on youth, education, employment, gender, child soldier, conflict negotiation, urbanization, forced migration, human rights, security, decentralization and coordination issues in war and post-war contexts. He is an experienced program evaluator and has consulted for policy institutes and numerous United Nations, non-government, and donor agencies. Dr. Sommers is an Associate Research Professor of Humanitarian Studies in the Institute of Human Security at The Fletcher School, Tufts University and a Research Fellow with Boston University's African Studies Center.

His presentation highlighted findings about the current situation of out-of-school youth in Sierra Leone. He described separate challenges that male and female youth face and the concerns and conditions which they share. Adulthood pressures, outcast status, drug use and the potentially negative consequences of successful youth programs will be addressed.

**Presentation:**

**BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH**

- *Marley's War: Terror and Transformation in Sierra Leone*
- Compared to *Stuck: Rwandan Youth on the Road to Adulthood*.
- Central thread: pop culture, role how particularly male youth have adjusted to post-war life (resistance, rebellion, drug use)
- Geographical focus: Freetown, Makeni (capital of North), Koidu, and Kanema (capital of East and longest experience of war)
How sample was chosen – snowball method to make sure you get trust – find a group and keep returning to speak with them

Youth are not necessarily trying to transition to adulthood. Rather they (especially young women) are more concerned with being classified as drop-outs or outcasts.

Central message from Bob Marley, Tupac Shakur, and Rambo
  - Societies are unjustly structured (esp. how they affect out of school youth)
  - Mainstream elite and politicians are corrupt

Many young leaders are privileged and very connected with the government making them out of touch with or not respected by general population

Overpowering tone in region: bestiality, misogyny - not just by rebels; domestic violence (even before war) is so common; poor and under-serviced: highest rate of infant mortality & mortality rate of women giving birth in world

Recruitment: forced to join or be killed, forced to kill people and be considered collaborators
  - Common joe soldiers were not supposed to carry out violence on civilians (while wearing uniform) but realistically it was considered open season
  - RUF: country was ripe for rebellion yet the approach was to terrorize the people who joined them

Extensive drug use by each and every military group, enabled perpetration of atrocities

Country’s leadership does not have a strong service tradition, but outstanding positive examples are present amongst the corruption

Best qualified people are working for INGO’s rather than domestic civil service

TWO KINDS OF YOUTH

Those who attain at least some secondary education

Those who do not
  - Ray ray boy: thief, hoodlum, unemployed young men (majority of youth)
  - Ray ray girl: prostitute
  - Originally, the meaning of ‘ray ray’ was intended for outsiders
  - Non-ray ray = everybody else

Common perception of ray rays: drugged out, violent

FINDINGS ABOUT FEMALE YOUTH TODAY

Female youth has two main options:
1. Find a husband, male benefactor, etc… to provide economically
   - Take super appetite (drug) – reduces stress, helps them sleep at night, plumps you up in the right way (buttocks)
   - End up marrying much older men
   - God, hope, and prayer (not mentioned really with males unless referring to Jah – Rastafarian God)
2. Find skills training: There are no youth programs, but they are desperate for them.
Strong awareness of programming but no access to them
Very limited, business is bad
Traditional avenues for vocational training are still the same since the 70s: hair plaiting, soap making, etc...

Extreme contrast to other cases: Not concerned about being called a woman. Here, the definition of a woman is based on physical maturation. Once you are able to have children, you’re a woman. This came out of the context that so few females are marrying which would normally define womanhood.

Stigma against ray ray girls is absolutely severe. If you’re gang raped and go to the police, they tell you to get out.
If you admit to being raped, you face incredible stigma. It is impossible to conceive of a guy marrying someone who is known to have been raped. Many more women were sexually abused than what is assumed because it is not talked about.
Condoms are fatalistic. Women who are prostitutes are all assumed to have AIDS.
Idle youth: phase for females being idle is not very long.

FINDINGS ABOUT MALE YOUTH TODAY

Sensitive about not being considered a man (unlike women)
More sensitive about being called drop outs (you’re a loser, a nobody) or ray ray boys
Commonly call themselves ‘disgruntled’
War period seems to have unleashed notion of girls as commodities; war experience affects relations between genders.
If they don’t provide for wife, woman can belittle their ‘manhood’.
Do “small small”: washing cars, harvesting sand; motorcycle taxiing (seems to be union for ex-combattants)
Health risks (blindness) for these occupations need to be considered.
Money is the solution to young man’s problem. Marry well, be a man.
Bob Marley: considered the teller of the future, popular to be a Jumah (follower of Jah), widespread references to his songs/lyrics (Stand Up For Your Right), Tupac (All Eyes On Me)

COMMONALITIES BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE YOUTH

Strong tradition of separation between male and female youth
Initiation ceremonies: in broad decline because they cost money (poro for men, bunde (sp?) for women)
Drop outs by definition anyone who didn’t finish senior secondary school (practically everyone of population)
No support – orphaned, disowned
Drug use – everyone
Striking talk about youth programming. It is seen as the way out.
Credibility of programming is suspect. Outsiders are often fooled and swindled by local authorities.
• Nepotism (rather than corruption) - who gets in the program is the biggest problem, people are very antagonized by this
• Community-centered work: local level authorities have their lists, supporters (cronies) get into programs
• Recent human rights training is back-firing
  o Human right not to obey parents, 50/50 rule – forces women to earn income on top of reproductive role

CONCLUSIONS

• Sensitivity of being considered a drop out is strong. This term and sentiment applies to overwhelming majority of youth.
• Education is a triangle in Sierra Leone: designed to exclude people and to serve elites; no room for people after primary school
• Community-based programming: Risky and potentially destructive; big problem and may be better for programs to fail
• Human rights: indictment about taking evaluations much more seriously
• Spend 2/3 of time with people not actually in program
• Programs are seen by population as the answer but they can’t get into them
• Clearly significant drug problem coming out of the war

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Any programs that do not stress inclusion fuel frustration
  o Try geographical inclusion – where are the people? Not in villages.
• Policies are going to make the difference, not programs (affect small %)
• Reach out-of-school youth through radios – insert discussion about being called a drop out, raise awareness, leaders bring up issues in speeches, etc…, bring issue of drugs to the forefront.

Discussion Points:

There were a range of questions and points raised by the participants in the meeting, These included:

(Comment) Marijuana is much stronger in West Africa than anywhere else. Elaborate on religious approaches to war (other than Rastafarian)?

• Girls – Muslim Christian; Boys – Jah

Coming from a NGO perspective on youth programming, what are the alternatives to using local authorities? When ignoring them they were accused of parallel programs, outsiders. How do we do this without receiving overwhelming criticism?

• Don’t go around the government. Use ammo (evaluative information) and open up discussion with them. Make it a win-win situation: “In order to improve your
credibility, we need to serve this specific population.” Engage in a different way: on the issue, not whether or not you’re doing the program. This will not work with all officials, but many will listen.

**From a policy perspective, how can we organize and advocate for needs of ray ray youth?**

- Change definition of what a CSO is. Don’t ignore youth leaders because they’ll make is hard for you. Hire youth leaders and give them exposure to what’s actually going on on the ground.
- Talk to youth groups that are organized (have names) but not necessarily registered with government. Consider actually getting out of the car to talk to the people [relevant to male youth; with female youth much more difficult].
- Felix’s anecdote: INGO observed village, did their mapping, and decided that there needs to be a well in town center because women walk 2 miles with babies on their back to get water. INGO came back, saw women weren’t using the well, and for the first time consulted with women and they said that walking those 2 miles is the only time they have privacy. Consult with people!
- Working with the people on the ground may seem as common sense, but when you’re actually on the ground trying to make change
- Marc: UN agencies underestimate their mandate to work with local governments; they want to get along with gov’t but need to advocate certain policies. Focus with government on where they want to go, and work on the means to achieve those goals and how one’s own studies support the findings

*Did your previous work with ex-combatants influence this work?*

*In regards to drug use, does anyone address the issues?*

- Not recognized as a big issue; Police are naturally involved with drugs because its an easy way to make money. Suggestion: Involve in radio programs.
- This answer regards the first question. In Sierra Leone, 87% are veterans. During the war, for first time in their lives, they were recognized as having real skill, and given responsibility in a massive way. Then UNICEF infantilizes youth and causes frustration. Those skills are not recognized quite often. How are they going to get a job? They are feared and have no education. Skills training is important for them. Make certificates nice because it gives ex-combatants something to show that they are trying to change their life. DDR in Sierra Leone has been much more positively regarded than DDR in the DRC.

*There is a need for challenging assumptions of programming. UN works more on sanctioning drugs but hasn’t managed to link the issues of drugs and corruption. If we’re so serious about changing programming, we need to change the stakeholders. Do you have other programming ideas/means to reach youth, especially female youth? Have you identified any authorities that youth respect (not fear) that could be a means to reach them?*
• Generally they respect former commanders. Even if you’re not an ex-combatant, military still gives you a sense of identity and more importantly, structure. Refer to his piece: “West Africa and the Youth Employment Issue.”

Why not tackle issues in different ways: fund road projects so youth can work with their hands so they don’t turn to drugs, build infrastructure of electricity, pipes?

• Specific program in Liberia: Stigmatized as being for ex-combatants, slave work. Extremely promising program by UN in Sierra Leone: get machinery into Sierra Leone (like compressors for cars), which requires beneficiaries to do apprenticeships. Unfortunately, they have been unable to get funding. We have to understand that so many people still don’t participate/benefit from programs.

How do you reach women were radio isn’t necessarily accessible? UNDP focused more on government initiatives – organize town hall meetings to get as many people as possible – how to get not only leaders but also youth and women. Local musician who sang song in local language. Get leader women on tv, on radio next to you. Ask not just how to reach women but where to reach women. Where do women gather? (Churches, mosques, market place…)

• 2 warning points: Assumption is to do community work, but in reality, communities are not functional in these [war-affected] places. When would you ever feel comfortable talking to government officials? By definition, most people will be afraid to talk to you.

Attendee Response: We used wrong people to get others on board. Used CSO’s to do announcements, and people were much more willing. Local people needed to buy into it.

Resources and Program Sharing

• For more information, please visit http://www.usip.org/specialists/marc-somers
• Washington Network on Children and Armed Conflict: http://www.wncac.org/