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Peace Education in Sierra Leone

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Peace Education: A Critical Post-war Reconstruction Tool in Sierra Leone

1. Introduction and Background

Societies traumatised by a period of war, divided by a history of gross human rights violations face a common problem and often reflect on the following questions: how should the gravest legacies of the war be dealt with to prevent reoccurrence? Does it require technical reconstruction in the form of infrastructure? Or is it correct to focus on de-militarisation of social life and politics in order to overcome cultures of violence? What tool (s) then is more prudent in post-war recovery?

Following the Cold War, patterns in armed conflicts changed from inter-state to intra-state. The world witnessed large numbers of the latter with devastating impacts. Among those is the eleven years (1991-2002) civil war fought in Sierra Leone. As it remains one of the most brutal civil wars, the root causes in summary are structural in nature. During the war years, civilians – women, children and men alike were targets of attack. According to Bangura (2005:1);

More than 200,000 of its population of just over four million were killed, and hundreds of thousands were dislocated into urban towns and neighbouring countries. The conflict however, will be most remembered for the thousands of amputated citizens, tens of thousands of child soldiers committing some of the worst atrocities, thousands of young girls taken as sex slaves and gang raped and the use of Sierra Leonean resources, particularly diamonds, to support and fuel the conflict.

Nevertheless, the war in Sierra Leone was officially declared over (when guns were silent) in January 2002 and still struggles to consolidate peace. As is often the case, there has been lots of socio-economic intervention from the international community, which through moral responsibility “pledged more than one hundred billion dollars in aid to war-torn societies and these were designed to build up infrastructure, to persuade formerly warring parties to resolve conflict in a non-violent way and to contribute to economic development and participatory governance” (Fischer, 2004:1).

Having reached a more stable place, the task now turns to making sure that such an ugly episode never repeats itself in the history of Sierra Leone. As a result, one key element in the peace and fragility nexus is that Peace Education (PE) can serve as the most tangible tool for post-war reconstruction. Therefore, in what follows, I shall provide an analytical review on post-war reconstruction using the lens of PE in the transition from war to peace. I argue that efforts to reconstruct post-civil war Sierra Leone that pays particular attention to the mind, attitude and behaviours of people in the form of deconstructing a resort to violence through innovative and institutional dimensions is of great importance. The paper is an analytical one drawing from supporting existing literatures in order to strengthen arguments presented. It hopes to serve as an entry point highlighting challenges and where to aim our criticisms in introducing PE education programmes.

2. Conceptions of Peace Education

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A number of terms are used to describe education for peacebuilding. These include peace education, emergency education, conflict resolution education, education for non-violence, development education, etc. Although the terms are not synonymous, they are more or less connected in their long-term goal. Each of these approaches responds to a particular set of problems that have been perceived as the causes of social injustice, conflict and war. Each could also be classified as preventive education to the problem which inspires it. Similarly, interventions designed to achieve the goal of behaviour transformation may also vary. The term education in this context refers to any process whether formal or informal that develops in children or youths (mostly combatants during the war) the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values leading to behaviour change.

The relationship between peace education and conflict has been illustrated across literature. There is emerging international literature that PE can transform the devastating effects of conflict in post war communities (World Bank, 2005) by reconstructing the minds or capacities of people to think and act positively and constructively. Also, a number of agencies, in particular the UN have published emergency education or peace education guidelines for practitioners (see UNESCO, 2002a; UNESCO 2002b). They highlight six kinds of PE skills-based programmes: peace programmes, multicultural and intercultural education, human rights education, civic education, citizenship and education for democracy, and education for international development. But what is Peace Education? It refers to the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behaviour changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully, and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, national or international level (UNICEF, 1999:9).

3. Why Peace Education?

Across the world, peace education is emerging as a critical tool for post war reconstruction; thus, the preamble of the constitution of UNESCO: "...wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed" (see UNESCO, 1945). The word reconstruction is mostly viewed as images of the construction of buildings, roads, hospitals and schools, or repairing physical damage, and suggests that the primary objective is to restore pre-war conditions (Freeman, 2008). Yet, the reality is that, those infrastructures are only small part of any reconstruction effort. Yes, government buildings have been renovated and roads destroyed during the war, to prevent government troops from going behind rebel zones, have been paved. But when the mentality of most people is narrowed to the use of violence as the only option in the face of discontent; or when political leaders embark on a "passive-aggressive behaviour" to block or prevent implementation of socio-economic policies in the aftermath of complex power-sharing arrangements (Deets, 2006), efforts put in reconstructing all important buildings will prove futile when violence erupts.

Bretherton et al (2003) argued that several qualitative studies definitively prove that peace education is a priority in post war reconstruction. Consequently, they provided a "tool kit" for PE in Sierra Leone. The contention was that parents, children and community leaders alike have consistently placed the need for peace education among their top priorities during and following conflict. The study noted that most Sierra Leoneans see post-conflict peace education as a critical pathway for reconstruction and nation building whether formal or informal. Hence, the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its 2004 report highlighted education as an instrument par excellence for post conflict reconstruction. These findings lend credence to the idea that this type of education can serve as a peace dividend following conflict in that, demonstrable focus on PE can provide an incentive for potentially aggressive parties to buy into peace.

Many of the root causes that prompted thousands of youths to join the rebellion have not been adequately addressed. In other words, issues of power, interest, identity (socio-economic status) which spawn a civil war do not disappear suddenly. Accordingly, an econometric analysis of civil war since 1960 concluded that countries who have suffered civil war are at high risk of further war;

Immediately after the end of hostilities there is a 40% chance of further conflict. This risk then falls at around one percentage point for each year of peace. In the first decade of post-conflict peace, societies face roughly double the

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risk of conflict that the pre-conflict risk factors would predict. Post-conflict societies are thus at substantial additional risk because of what has happened to them during conflict (Collier, 2000:6).

One likely explanation that accounts for this increase in risk in the Sierra Leone context is that people have got used to violence, so that the norms which inhibit political violence prior to the war have been eroded; and political allegiance has taken a different turn with ethnic dominance (Collier, 2000). The war destroyed many lives and dreams, but what it left behind was violent attitudes in everyday life of people. For instance, recent political gatherings in September this year transformed into attacks and deaths of supporters of the two major political parties which prior to the war had, and continue to have, regional and ethnic dimensions. This incident caused the national police force to enact an indefinite ban on all political party gathering nationwide. Many other political and social events can also be highlighted.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that PE has been criticised for focusing almost exclusively on inter-personal conflict rather than conflict between collectives or communities, Bretherton et al (2003) argue that, peace is of course always about relationships between people. If peace is to be cemented in post-war Sierra Leone, there is therefore a need to work on building positive relationships which encourage co-operation between people and deal with difference and conflict in non-violent ways. There is evidence that personal attitudes at least can be influenced positively because personal or individual attitude is what influences and transforms the collective. For example, a meta-analysis of 25 years of evidence in the United States found that conflict resolution education (which is also part of a peace education component) contributes to the reduction in anti-social behaviour among individuals (Garrard & Lipsey, 2007).

PE in particular is associated with a decrease in risk. It can be emphasized as a conflict management tool, targeting youths to promote harmonious relationships which guarantee the culture of non-violence (UNESCO, 2002a; UNESCO, 2002b). However, merely avoiding a risk factor may amount to “negative peace” as the mere absence of war. This does leave open the question of the contribution of PE to “positive peace”, although that may be a different question. Cross-national studies of the determinants of social cohesion found that in most post-conflict communities, the best predictor of high social capital is simply years of formal and informal education (Collier, 2000). For example, PE as one type of education has the potential to perform a redistributive function directly and indirectly by influencing other drivers of the conflict, thereby helping to leverage conflict potential.

4. Peace Education Challenges

Arguably, the least frightening way to assess post-war reconstruction efforts in Sierra Leone is to look to Sierra Leone as providing a multitude of lessons for the international community on priorities of reconstruction. But the most frightening way to look at it is that the gap between theory and practice or reality has not been resolved and thus serves as threat to sustainable peace in the country. So what then are some of the challenges to post-war peace education in Sierra Leone?

According to Fischer (2004:5), “the goal of external assistance therefore should be to design assistance packages that provide incentives for the non-violent expression, management and resolution of conflicts, even while attending to the pressing needs of their civilian victims”. But the intriguing point is that donor community particularly put pressure on the government to meet macro-economic objectives when the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) spending caps prevent increased government spending (Freeman, 2008). Socio-capital and economic activities declined during the war years making the resources or financial capacity of the government weak and willing to dance to the tune of donors. While not wishing to apportion blame, the challenge for donors is to direct funds to long-term projects that consolidate sustainable peace and development.

After the cease-fire agreement, donors concentrated on disarmament and reintegration as a strategy for preventing future violence among youth. At the same time, their strategies for macroeconomic growth and spending caps undermined economic opportunities for those same youths who see violence as an act of everyday life. The international community overlooked the role of PE among youths with a short-sighted drive for immediate peace, disarmament, and the creation of a barely functional government. According to International Crisis Group, a World

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Bank study recommended less emphasis be placed on macroeconomic balances (Freeman, 2008).

Moreover, analysis of World Bank project expenditure in 21 conflict-affected countries from 1994 to 2002 shows that 23.9% of loans and grants were spent on construction and rehabilitation (World Bank, 2005). In other words, physical infrastructure is an appealing investment for donor agencies. They most often than not used too narrow minded a concept paying great attention on technical assistance after the end of violent conflict (Fischer, 2005). A broader conceptualisation is needed to support a difficult long-term process of PE in transformation from war to peace.

Again, the international community has struggled tremendously with the challenges of laying the groundwork for sustainable peace, sometimes forgetting that countries recovering from conflicts do so under differing and unique conditions. No two countries are the same even within Africa. Challenges faced by countries emerging from conflict in Africa, such as Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Angola to name but a few, are completely different from those faced by Europe after the Second World War. So, a one-size-fits-all approach to post-war reconstruction is inadequate. It's likely that the failure to introduce and implement PE into school curricula in post-conflict Sierra Leone is a direct consequence of the donors' choice of programmes to be carried out at the expense of others.

It's still not too late for the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) to implement PE; yet an explanation or excuse will always be provided by the government, rather than taking responsibility for continuing what has been implemented. Likely excuses are that the International Monetary Fund's insistence on privatization of public enterprises makes it an impossible task for them (GoSL) to provide the necessary funds needed when the national budget is comprised of 65% foreign aid. Opportunities in the agricultural sector have been further stifled by international insistence on removing trade barriers that has allowed cheaper Asian rice to swamp the local market, thereby reducing the ability of small farmers to compete; and the focus right now is on other priority areas like food security (Freeman, 2008). Collier (2000) suggests that growth typically peaks in the second four-year period after conflict, and this period is typically where external funding reduces. This is due not only to the destruction of war, but also historical under-investment. But even if there's availability of funds for the government to implement PE programmes, the problem will be an inability to spend the funds, due to limited (internal) capacity, and restrictive (external) conditionalities. While political leadership and institution building (World Bank, 2005) can provide a clear vision to help coordinate donors, lead policy development and implement reform, passive-aggressive politics practiced by local political leaders at national and grassroot levels can hinder desirable socio-economic development programmes targeting the masses.

Additionally, Sommers (2002) points to shortcomings in the functions and behaviours of international agencies. In post-conflict settings, the World Bank has adopted "Community-Driven Reconstruction" as a strategy to describe the transfer of grants to Community Development Committees, who prioritise needs and investments and if necessary, contract implementing partners. The World Bank has increased its spending on "community driven development" operations across sectors from \$325m in 1996 to approximately \$2b in 2003 (World Bank, 2005). Let's assume for instance that, one of the priority areas of a Community Development Committee in a remote town in Sierra Leone (a diamond rich area that suffered gross human rights violations during the war). Receiving funds from donors to carry out PE programmes is one thing; another is to implement programmes to achieve desired results. The shortcoming or challenge would be the non-existence of an enabling environment (e.g lack of experience) which can provide information to support identification of appropriate methods, decide on the level of provision, ensure maintenance of minimum standards, and respond to changing demand for services over time. The detrimental effect that this can have on fragile government systems is that, the reduced national government role after conflict carries the potential for making recovery more difficult.

PE as a long-term process and goal raises the concern of how it should be organised if it is to serve as a peace dividend. In looking at post-conflict recovery, Davies (2004) asks four pertinent questions: (i) What is the trajectory of change? (ii) Who plans and decides what? (iii) What is to be reconstructed and how does PE education contribute? (iv) How is progress evaluated? The most fascinating is the second question because the sequencing of post-conflict programmes is typically reflected in the way that funding agencies are organised to finance activities; in particular, the division between short-term emergency aid and long-term development aid. This division is highly problematic. Also, "lack of coordination still seems to exist within the UN system, and budgetary, institutional and operational

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divisions limit cooperation between humanitarian and development actors in planning interventions, mobilising resources and implementing projects” (Fischer, 2004:9).

Generally, from Sommers (2002), it could be noted that there are problems with the involvement of international agencies in post-war peace and development activities. These include: they dominate the setting of priorities and policy decisions, they coordinate poorly (e.g. wages / incentives), they have too much emphasis on the targets and scope of investments, they restrict the timing of investments (e.g. only “post-conflict”), they control the timing and degree of inclusion of local and national actors, and most of their programmes and activities overlap (Sommers, 2002).

5. Final Considerations

The devastations caused by conflict and the scars that it leaves behind are difficult to heal. Therefore post war reconstruction is required to provide impetus to the healing processes that is overtly difficult, gradual and so must be sustained. Peace education is a useful process that has promise to contribute to post conflict reconstruction. It's about empowering people with the skills, attitudes and knowledge. These skills include understanding different perspectives, developing positive approaches towards dealing with discontent or disagreement, and social responsibility in order to build, maintain and restore relationships at all levels of interaction as a means to managing social tensions and risks of instability.

As mentioned above, there is a need for theory to become reality. The desire to rebuild the state and prevent reoccurrence should not only be limited to physical infrastructure. The mind of the people who are expected to govern and prevent a relapse of war must be a long-term priority in Sierra Leone. Violence in the minds of youths most of whom participated in the civil war needs to be deconstructed. Reconstruction in Sierra Leone focused most directly on the immediate needs for disarmament and demobilization of former combatants. The large-scale disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) effort in Sierra Leone has been cited as a United Nations success story. After all, most people never used guns before the war started except for hunting. The point is that war starts in the minds of people; hence the reason to pay great attention to the art of promoting peaceful co-existence through peace education as it needs to be constructed and consolidated on a day-to-day basis.

Most of the conditions that exist today (unemployment, illiteracy, marginalization, ethnicity, corruption etc) amidst a national sector policy, a Sector Wide Approach (SWAP), a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), a Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), and a rolling development plan called Vision 2025; are some of the same conditions the led to the conflict; and still threaten peace. Yes, socio-economic conditions might not be favourable for the next 10 years. But people need not resort to armed insurgency as a solution. Recent Arab uprisings have taught the world that there is another powerful tool one can use to change the status-quo. Therefore, PE which also encompasses non-violence education must be a vital element in post-war reconstruction programmes – as a social practice in the transformation of a culture of violence.

Finally, the support and political will of state authorities to achieve sustained peace education is paramount. But PE needs to extend beyond a focus on the state for inclusiveness of all. Local willingness from the public is of higher relevance. For example, if political leaders undermine efforts to implement PE, donors themselves can start working alongside non-state actors like other international non-governmental organizations or local organizations, with a gradual transition to the state for a greater role in service delivery. To this end, it is worthy to note that war-torn societies vary enormously in their ability to manage and absorb foreign assistance. Therefore, careful attention should be paid to the diversity and realities facing different countries, as what works in country “A” might not work in country “B” even if they are from the same continent; thus making the one-size-fits-it-all approach questionable.

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