

Youth Empowerment In Sierra Leone.
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Out of the millions who suffered in the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone, the youth were, in many ways, the most drastically affected. However, today they are the most neglected in post-war reparations in the country. Prior to the civil war, youth welfare and development programs were largely absent in the country, and as a result a vast majority of the youth were isolated and left with no hope or confidence in society. They were entirely detached and remained distant from community building or development. Consequently, during the civil war, youth were the most susceptible to be incorporated by the rebels to fight and destroy their own country. When the rebel incursion started a majority of them voluntarily joined the movement, as they found new meaning to their lives.

The war ended almost five years ago, but the youth problem has compounded. The post-war rehabilitation of children and youth affected by the war has been limited to basic schooling. They still remain largely detached and uninvolved in the development of the country. Apart from classroom education, they remain largely unguided and lack direction or motivation to get involved in society. As a result, everyday the country loses enormous contributions that could be tapped from this segment of the population.

I firmly believe that one way to guide the youth of Sierra Leone and win back their confidence is to engage them in community building and development. My project would involve a two day national youth workshop, with the objective of empowering and motivating the youth to participate in nation building. At the end of the workshop each participant would go and pioneer a youth community service program in their various schools and, with the help of their teachers, they would do various community service projects in their localities.

Peace: Most of Sierra Leone's problems emanated from disgruntled adults and youths because they felt neglected by society. The country is at peace today, but if this looming youth problem is not attended to Sierra Leone runs the risk of another senseless war. Nearly everyday, newspapers from Sierra Leone report of students (wearing school uniforms) involved in vandalism of public properties. This is just an example of the potential threat they pose to the shaky peace in the country. Therefore, to maintain the fragile peace Sierra Leone now enjoys, immediate attention must be paid to the youth. I strongly believe that the project I am proposing will go a long way in achieving this goal if I am chosen to receive this grant.

Workshop: I would work with National Accountability Group, (an NGO in Freetown) to organize a two day national youth workshop. The target group would be those between the ages of 16 and 20 years: I would invite at least one or two student representatives and an optional teacher representative, of all the Senior Secondary Schools in the country to come to Freetown for the workshop. Sierra Leone has at least 100 accessible Senior Secondary Schools, and it is my goal through this project to introduce a youth community service program in each of these schools.

The program of the workshop would provide motivational speakers (university Professors and other prominent society members) who would talk about peace building, youth leadership, the rights and privileges of youth, and youth responsibility to society. There would also be small group discussions and brainstorming sessions for possible service projects that participants could implement in their respective communities. Finally, there would be skills training. For example, basic first-aid training, HIV Aids sensitization and malaria prevention training. I am optimistic this workshop would not only be a good precedent, but the outcome could also have a profound positive impact on the entire youth population in Sierra Leone.

In United World College of South East Asia (UWCSEA) I was involved in the planning stages of a youth peace workshop between Pakistani and Indian youths hosted by our school. This workshop was a great success; it allowed each side to see the point of view of the other and they went to their respective

countries to implement youth peace programs. Each year they would report to UWCSEA about their successes and how they have kept in touch with their counterparts. I learned from this project youth have the potential to be especially influential in resolving conflict and creating change. Through my proposal I hope to bring together, for the first time in Sierra Leone, youth from all ethnic backgrounds to empower themselves, and I am excited about the possibilities of bridging ethnic barriers, a major factor in the conflict, and creating inter-ethnic bonds among these students.

Planning and Timeline: Most of the planning would involve outreach; I would lead a team of three to visit all participating schools. The outreach would not only allow me to explain the motives of the project, but to also use the opportunity to request the cooperation of the entire student bodies in each of these schools to welcome and help their representatives implement various service projects. The outreach might take four weeks and there would be another two weeks of logistics planning in Freetown. I hope to hold the workshop in the first week of July.

Outcome: At the end of the workshop, 200 youths representing 100 schools nationwide will hopefully come out feeling empowered and motivated to contribute positively to society. Their first task will be to lead their peers in their respective schools to immediately implement at least two community service projects in their communities. The country has lots of service opportunities, for example, they can volunteer in the amputee and displaced camps. They could also help carry out grass root campaigns against the spread of HIV/AIDS and malaria through education and sensitization in their respective communities.

When I left UWCSEA, I volunteered in a year long community service project in Kenya and Cambodia. In Kenya we worked with youth in a small village. In six months we were able to motivate them to get involved in the community through community service projects, and by the time we left, the youth in this village took the initiative to do lots of service work in their village. It was very empowering to see the youth come out in large numbers to fill pot holes on the main road from their village to the highway, without been told by the chief. As pioneers we had amazing results, and now UWCSEA sends students to Kigama village in western Kenya every year. This is the type of motivation I would like to instill in the youth of Sierra Leone.

Monitoring and Sustainability: After the workshop, the bulk of the project would be self-sustainable with little or no financial burden. The goal is that each representative will pioneer a community service program/club in their school and the teachers will help them raise funds and take initiative about areas they can help in their locality. When I leave I will rely on NAG for monitoring. There would be a very minimal standing budget that could be used to support the first service projects and also for monitoring.

Biography: I was born and raised in a small village in Sierra Leone. In 2002 after completing my Secondary Schooling I was awarded a government scholarship to attend UWCSEA. I graduated in 2004 but I took a year off school to volunteer in a year long service project. The UWC philosophy of demanding of their scholars to give back to society through community service was my sole motivation to defer my enrolment at Whitman College and go to Kenya and Cambodia. As a sophomore at Whitman College, I was recently appointed Student Academic Adviser, and the bulk of my responsibility is being a role model to my peers. In this job, and with my involvement in several other activist groups on campus, I have been able to make a mark in the Whitman community. I cherish all my experiences abroad thus far, and it is my deepest desire to go back and share some of the values I have learned with my peers in Sierra Leone. I am a Mathematics/Economics combined major and French minor. I hope to become a development economist so I can help in the development of my dear country.