

**Title: Youth Empowerment in Sierra Leone**

**School: Whitman College**

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**Project Summary:** The youth were the most affected in the 11 year civil war in Sierra Leone, however, they are the most neglected in post-war reparations in the country. Prior to the war, youth were marginalized and their participation in nation building was largely absent. These conditions persist today, 5 year after the war. The goal of the project was therefore to motivate young people and create a platform for them to take active role in the developmental processes in the nation. To achieve this goal, I proposed to organize a two day national youth workshop. The workshop targeted in-school youth from all over Sierra Leone, and it was intended to empower and motivate young people to take active role in their respective communities.

The entire project was divided into three parts, outreach, the workshop, and follow ups.

**Outreach** took about four weeks, from June 3<sup>th</sup> to June 29<sup>th</sup>. It entailed visiting all the 12 districts in the country, with the aim of reaching out to almost all the senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone. We (the two- man outreach team) invited four schools from each district and from each school, 3 or 4 students. We also invited 2 teacher representatives from each district. During the outreach, we were able to talk the principals, teachers, and the student body of each school, about the project and its intended goals. Another big part of the outreach was the phone-in discussion radio programs we had on both the national radio and the United Nation's radio in Freetown. It allowed us to reach out to the whole nation. Between June 29<sup>th</sup> and July 19<sup>th</sup>, we did follow up with participating schools via phone calls. Other logistics were also put in place for the workshop.

**The workshop** was held from July 19<sup>th</sup> -July 21<sup>st</sup>. Because of the overwhelming positive response from the students and the nation as a whole, the workshop ended up being a 3 day program instead of 2. The workshop location was also moved to Bo, in stead of Freetown because of the increasing political tension in the city. Bo is the second largest city in Sierra Leone, and geographically it was a more convenient location and relatively cheaper. We had five speakers during the workshop; prominent among them was the Minister of Works, Dr. Caizer Boima, the Vice Chancellor Njala University, Prof. Abdullah Mansary and Paul Sengeh, from UNICEF. Dr. Boima spoke on the general theme of the workshop; *"Youth Involvement as a Strategy for Social, Economic, and Sustainable Development in Sierra Leone"* And Prof. Mansary spoke on the topic; *"Youth service as a component of social capital formation and as a means of reintegrating marginalized youth in Sierra Leone"*. They both highlighted the importance of youth involvement, by way of volunteering, and in community service projects, in the development of the country. The participants a lot valuable lessons during the workshop; they were giving a peer health educator training, community health educator training and first aid treatment training. Another valuable lesson they learnt was writing project proposals. By the end of the second day, they were challenged to design community service projects in their respective communities, and the most compelling project received the sum \$500 to implement it. With that motivation, the participants came up with 18 brilliant projects that were to be implemented in different communities. In my closing remark of the workshop, I donated \$500 to the wining proposal. It was a very symbolic donation; in this remark I challenged other donors to extend similar gestures to young people committed to development in their community. To the participants, it meant they were now capable of not only writing project, but also capable of seeking funds for implementing them. At the end of the workshop, I urged participants to go back to their respective schools and form youth clubs that will be committed to contributing to the development of their community.

**Follow up:** The follow up will be done by Youth Action International (Y.A.I), a local NGO in Freetown. Y.A.I was very instrumental in the organization of the workshop and they served as the focal contact point for parents and participants that had questions and concern about the project. Follow up will entail Youth Action checking in with all participating schools on monthly basis to monitor and give support to active youth clubs. After the workshop follow up has been very limited since schools are closed for the election process. However, Youth Action has been receiving lots of

project proposal from individual participants. Youth Action will also monitor the implementation of the \$500 project.

**Results:** The project was an overwhelming success. My biggest concern was getting young people, especially girls to come to the workshop, giving that the timing of the project coincided with the election process in the country. However, during the outreach, I was able to convince the school principals and the students that project was void of politics. The principals were then able to persuade parents to allow their children to travel to Bo for the workshop. The use of both private and government media helped to sell the project effectively. At the end, we had a turn of 145 out of 164 students invited, and 20 out of 24 teachers invited. Because schools are out for the elections, we have not been able to monitor the activity of the participants in their respective communities. However, at the end of the workshop the young people showed a lot of promise; the fact that they were able to come up with brilliant community service projects, and their determination to implement these projects, demonstrated a lot of potential. They all left poised and motivated to contribute in their respective communities. Another indication of success of the project was the media attention it attracted. The workshop had three full days of media coverage, from both private and government media. Most of the journalist and observers regarded the event as a historical precedent. The project was had an overwhelming reception from the whole nation, and most people want to see it repeated. The main goal of the project, which is to increase youth involvement in their communities, will be monitored when schools reopen.

**Implications:** The project had a tremendous impact on the prospect of peace in the country. The 3-day residential national youth workshop served as a platform for breaking ethnic barriers among young Sierra Leoneans. The workshop targeted youths from almost every ethnic group in Sierra Leone, allowing them to interact and inspire each other, and to create life long friendships. Also, the project's main goal was to integrate young people, in the developmental processes in their respective communities. Abject poverty was a major cause of the war, and today Sierra Leone is still ranked 176<sup>th</sup> out of 177<sup>th</sup> countries on the UN HDI index. Getting youth involved in community service projects will certainly boost the social capital in the country, and hence contribute to national development. Youth can also channel their interests through their involvement in their communities. The most remarkable impact of the project was the formation of the "Youth Development Initiatives Network" (Y.D.I.N). The goal of the Y.D.I.N is to support young people to design and implement community service projects in communities having no less than 1000 people. The Y.D.I.N was launched at the end of the 3-day youth workshop with the sum of \$500. The money was donated to the winning project proposal from a group of participants, who designed an excellent project targeting malaria in their community. The Y.D.I.N will function as a support, seeking funds and donating it to youth designed community service projects. I am currently doing fundraising activities at Whitman, with the hope of going back to Sierra Leone in December. I hope to go back to Sierra Leone with as much funds as possible, to launch series of youth designed projects in all the 12 districts. I will return in the summer to make a presentation of the results of these projects on national TV. My hope is that after showcasing the results of these projects, government, private business companies, and local donors in Sierra Leone will view the Y.D.I.N as another viable option in the developmental efforts in the country, thus making the Y.D.I.N less external donor dependent. I would therefore like to make an appeal to the Mrs. Davis and the Davis Foundation for an extra financial support to keep this noble alive. The December break will be a perfect opportunity; the momentum from the workshop is still alive and schools will be on. I will be able to launch a few Y.D.I.N projects and follow up with participants from the workshop. Finally, I learnt a lot while implementing this project. I have always been interested in development economics and this summer's project gave me the first hand experience in dealing with developmental issues in my own country. I grew a lot in my critical and analytical skills, and my love development economics has only been reinforced. I would therefore like to convey my sincere gratitude, and that of the many Sierra Leoneans who stand to benefit from impact of this summer's project, to Mrs. Davis, the Davis Foundation, and all those who contributed to making the 100 project for peace a success.

