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High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

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Civil war broke out in Sierra Leone in 1991 and lasted more than a decade. During the conflict, both the national army and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group responsible for some of the worst atrocities during the conflict, abducted children from the villages they attacked and occupied. An estimated 15,000–22,000 children of all ages were taken from their families and forced to serve the military groups in a number of ways, from performing domestic chores and other military support roles to committing acts of violence (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Many were sexually abused and forced to use alcohol and drugs. At the end of the conflict, short-term disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs targeting children formerly associated with fighting and armed groups attempted to prepare children to return to their homes. In the medium to long term, however, true reintegration depends on former child soldiers having access to educational and training opportunities that will support them to achieve greater self-sufficiency and increased productivity within their communities.

A number of studies have explored aspects of education relating to the reintegration of former child soldiers into their communities (Verhey 2001; Annan et al. 2006; Wessells 2006a). In particular, researchers have shown the negative effects of child soldiering on the educational and economic outcomes of former child soldiers. A few studies have discussed the relative benefits of education for war-affected youth during the postconflict phase (Santacruz and Arana 2002; Annan et al. 2006; Wessells 2006a). In Sierra Leone, available research focuses on the DDR process (Humphreys and Weinstein 2004, 2007) and has explored the relationship between DDR program participation and outcomes such as income-earning capacity, confidence in the democratic process, and acceptance within a sample of mainly adults (mean age of 31 years). Although the large survey sample included some youth as young as 14, educational opportunities and issues facing children and adolescents were not specifically examined. The complexity of providing education to former child soldiers in Sierra Leone and the potential challenges that may be associated with their return to school remain unexplored in the research. This study aims to fill this gap and presents the perspectives of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, their caregivers, and community members speaking to the role of education in their psychosocial adjustment and community reintegration following the end of the civil war.

In this article we first examine the state of the Sierra Leonean educational system before and after the war and its role in the reintegration of former child soldiers. Next, we present the perspectives of former child soldiers, their caregivers, and community members on the role of education in reintegrating former child soldiers into society. We also examine the barriers they described in accessing educational and other training opportunities and in achieving their future goals.

Background and Context

According to the UN special representative of the secretary-general for children and armed conflict, approximately 250,000 child soldiers were involved in more than 50 ongoing conflicts in 2005 (United Nations 2005). The availability of light weapons in many countries means that children are easily armed and manipulated by fighting forces (Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin 2006; Wessells 2006a). The first global survey of child soldiers estimates that more than half a million children have been abducted or forcibly conscripted into government forces or armed groups in 87 countries over the past decade (CSUCS 2002). Child soldiers are defined as children (boys and girls) under age 18 who become part a of regular or irregular armed force or group in any capacity, including in roles of cooks, porters, human shields, sexual slaves, messengers, spies, or frontline combatants (UNICEF 2001, 2007).¹

In wartime, child soldiers act as perpetrators, but they are also victims. Past exposure to extreme violence and trauma present significant risks to the postconflict psychological well-being of former child soldiers (Derluyn et al. 2004; Bayer et al. 2007). Many former child soldiers struggle with feelings of guilt and shame over their own violent actions and have difficulty coming to terms with their wartime behaviors (Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin 2006; Wessells 2006a, 2006b).

The loss of educational and economic opportunities, joblessness, and disabilities that child soldiers face are fundamental threats to their long-term stability.² In northern Uganda, Annan and Blattman (2006) found that, compared to children not associated with fighting forces, the longer children spent in the captivity of a rebel group, the larger the gap in education outcomes. Further, those who were abducted at younger ages were less likely to return to school after their release. Research with child soldiers from Mozambique and El Salvador suggests that postconflict educational and economic challenges are tightly linked for former child soldiers, perhaps more so than their experiences with war itself (Santacruz and Arana 2002; Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin 2006; Boothby, Strang, and Wessells 2006).

Education in Sierra Leone

Before the civil war, Sierra Leone's education system was failing, and the country was unable to accommodate the millions of children seeking public education. In 1990, only 55 percent of primary school-age children were enrolled in school (Republic of Sierra Leone 2001). Schools at all levels collected fees from parents, effectively barring the poorest children from receiving an education. While little detailed data are available for the immediate prewar period, it is clear from literacy figures and other secondary measures of educational effectiveness that the system was not meeting its goals.

Demand for education in Sierra Leone since the end of the war has been quite high (Wang 2007), reflecting the country's need to rebuild and intensifying strains on an already dysfunctional system. At present, the education system has a number of structural problems. In the 2004–5 school year, the gross completion rate for primary school in Sierra Leone was only 65 percent (Wang 2007). And in 2004, junior secondary school enrollment was only 17 percent of primary school enrollment, and senior secondary school enrollment was only 8 percent of primary school enrollment (Statistics Sierra Leone 2006b). In 2007, the gross enrollment rate for senior secondary school was a mere 10 percent (Wang 2007). Additionally, in 2004, 79 percent of students in class 6 were already over age—due to a late school start, repetition, or interrupted schooling (caused at least in part by time spent as child soldiers). In 2003–4, 76 percent of students in junior secondary school and 77 percent of students in senior

¹This definition is not limited to children who carry arms and includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.

²See Boothby (1986), Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin (2006), Wessells (2006a), and Williamson (2006).

secondary school were over age (Statistics Sierra Leone 2006b). The older students get, the more likely they are to leave school before completion.

There are several models designed to retain over-age students and sometimes catch them up to their peers, depending on their age, the level of schooling they completed prior to the disruption in their education, and the duration of this disruption. These programs compress the regular school curriculum to move children quickly through missed years so that they can rejoin their peers within the formal schooling system. One such program was implemented in Liberia in the late 1990s (Sinclair 2002). The program, which reached approximately 6,000 pupils in 1999, compressed 6 years of primary schooling into 3 years. Graduates of the program could then enter the first year of junior secondary school. The program's success was attributed in part to the students' strong motivation to learn and to prepare themselves to reenter the regular school.

In Sierra Leone, two government programs attempted to meet the needs of over-age youth after the war: Complementary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS) and Rapid Response Education Program (RREP). RREP ended in 2002 after serving 7,115 students in 2000–2001 and 6,414 in 2001–2, with RREP students moving into regular schools or a CREPS program (Wang 2007). CREPS, a program for youth age 16 and over, began with 2,188 students in 2000–2001. It served a high of 11,663 children in 2002–3 and, as of the 2004–5 school year, had 9,123 students enrolled (Wang 2007).

CREPS schools may better serve the needs of over-age students by providing a same-age peer group and accelerated learning, but there is evidence that they offer lower-quality education than other schools. According to Glennerster et al. (2006), CREPS schools had fewer textbooks per pupil and higher teacher absenteeism than regular government schools.

Several short-term education and training programs funded by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and donor governments operated in the immediate postwar period. These programs were aimed less at reintegrating former child soldiers into the formal school system than at giving them basic literacy skills, life skills, and vocational training. This type of programming was appropriate for youth who would not return to school for very long, owing to pressure to start their own families or support existing family members.³ One such program was the USAID-funded Youth Reintegration Training and Education for Peace program (YRTEP). The program, which enrolled students for periods from 6 months to 1 year, operated in 1,300 sites across Sierra Leone and served over 45,000 participants during 2001. An important aspect of YRTEP was its mandate to serve both former child soldiers and nonformer child soldiers. This differentiated the program from many other child- and youth-focused DDR programs that were only open to former combatants (Hansen et al. 2002).

Several evaluations of YRTEP have been conducted. For instance, Fauth and Daniels (2001) found that 99 percent of respondents reported improved conflict management skills, 83 percent said that they were more equipped to provide for themselves and their families, 98 percent said that their reading and writing competencies had improved, and 99 percent said that their numeracy skills had improved. And Hansen and colleagues (2002) concurred with this evaluation in terms of behavioral improvements, finding that communities and participants alike reported less rudeness and fewer violent actions. At the same time, they disagreed with this evaluation on literacy gains, countering that “success stories about gains in literacy tend

³For example, Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin (2006), in their 16-year longitudinal study of 39 Mozambican boy soldiers who passed through the Lhanguene center in Maputo, found that the majority had adult goals in mind, such as making money and marrying, rather than a desire to return to school.

to be more about the self-confidence that comes with learning how to spell one's name or make short shopping lists instead of becoming functionally literate" (Hansen et al. 2002, 29).

Barriers to Education

The Sierra Leonean government began the process of abolishing school fees with its Free Primary Education Policy in 2001. The Education Act of 2004 confirmed the removal of fees and made education compulsory through junior secondary school.⁴ Removing fees caused a surge in primary school enrollment, which doubled from 660,000 in 2001–2 to 1.3 million in 2004–5 (Wang 2007). Still, by recent estimates only 69 percent of primary-school-age children are enrolled in school (Statistics Sierra Leone 2006a).

Costs clearly continue to play a role in family decisions about school attendance, despite fee abolition at the national level. Although there are no longer nationally mandated tuition fees, families still have to pay community fees and purchase uniforms and school supplies. Nationwide, in 2004 just over 50 percent of the costs of primary education were borne by households (Wang 2007). This amounts to Le 50,871, or almost US\$21 (Wang 2007). This is a heavy burden in a country where the 2004 gross national income per capita was just \$210 (World Bank 2007). For many families, there is also the opportunity cost of schooling—the wages or labor the child can contribute to the family if he or she is not in school.

After the war's end, several NGOs and community-based organizations provided aid to former child soldiers to facilitate their school attendance. UNICEF's Community Education Investment Program (CEIP), for instance, offered school fee waivers, uniforms, books, and supplies to former child soldiers (Alexander 2006). This aid likely kept many of the former child soldiers in our sample in school. However, respondents in our study reported that NGO aid was sometimes ineffectively dispersed, becoming a source of stress for children, who were sent home by teachers when their fees were not paid on time. Moreover, when the CEIP program ended in 2005, many former child soldiers dropped out of school (Alexander 2006). In addition, NGO educational aid was generally only available to children who had gone through a formal DDR program, thus discriminating against female former child soldiers, who were more likely to go directly back to their home villages without passing through formal DDR programs (McKay and Mazurana 2004). Girls who did not attend DDR programs missed out on not only school fees and training assistance but also psychosocial treatment, assistance in locating family members, and medical care.

Benefits of Education in the Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers

In a broad sense, education, both traditional and alternative, supports the reintegration of former child soldiers in a number of ways. For instance, Machel (1996) emphasizes the important link between literacy/skills learning and economic security for returning child soldiers, factors that often determine the successful social reintegration of returning children and prevent re-recruitment. Indeed, in northern Uganda, because of schooling loss as well as serious injuries suffered during the war, former abductees were, on average, less than half as likely to be engaged in skilled work. These constraints furthermore reduced by about one-third the average wage earned by these adolescents postreintegration (Annan and Blattman 2006). Research on former child soldiers from El Salvador has also emphasized the important livelihood benefits of education (Verhey 2001).

Attending school and training programs can also help war-affected youth to attain a sense of normalcy and safety in their everyday lives (Sommers 2003; Betancourt 2005). For some of these children, schools may become a "security base" where they feel safe (Elbedour et al.

⁴*Education Act, 2004, Supplement to the Sierra Leone Gazette* 135, no. 19.

1993; Loughry et al. 2006). In their study of 400 Palestinian children in Gaza and the West Bank, Loughry and colleagues (2006) found that attending structured nonformal activities, including cultural and recreational opportunities and after-school educational support, led to improved measures of children's psychological health.

Education can also encourage goal setting and hope for the future among war-affected youth (Betancourt 2005). The school system provides a number of short- to medium-term benchmarks that children can use to measure their progress in a positive direction. For example, attending classes regularly, adhering to classroom rules, doing homework, studying for and taking exams, and completing grades or cycles of education can all serve as achievable goals providing forward momentum in the reintegration process (Nicolai and Triplehorn 2003). The opportunity to learn specific tasks can enhance children's confidence in their abilities and provide them with a sense of purpose in their lives. In a study of conflict-affected Palestinian youth in Gaza, more than half of both boys and girls reported putting effort into schoolwork and "studying hard" as a prominent coping mechanism for dealing with trauma and stress (Hundt et al. 2004). In their study of Sierra Leonean refugees in a Liberian camp, Kline and Mone (2003, 326) found that optimistic youth who were coping well with their war experiences valued educational programs that "recognized the central importance of a strong belief in the value and purpose of life."

Perhaps most important, school attendance can help young people returning to their communities after war begin to see themselves as someone other than soldiers or victims. Educational or vocational programs foster an active means of overcoming the "lost time" due to war; they may also help to "normalize" life for returning child soldiers and allow them to develop an identity and a sense of self-worth separate from that of a soldier.⁵

War Trauma May Impede Former Child Soldiers from Benefiting from Education

Despite the potential of education to improve the lives of former child soldiers, their traumatic experiences during the war may make it difficult for them to fully reap these benefits. Ajduković (1998) found in her study of 45 adolescents in a refugee center in Zagreb, Croatia, that war-exposed youth suffered from post-traumatic stress reactions, including "intrusive images (48.9%), loss of interest (40.9%), restlessness (37.8%), appetite disturbances (33.3%), and increased irritability (31.1%)" (209). Furthermore, there were a number of significant correlations between post-traumatic stress reactions and indicators of self-efficacy. In this study, adolescents with higher levels of stress reactions had poor expectations about their future ($r = .42, p < .01$), reported feeling less competent ($r = .35, p < .05$), and had a stronger external locus of control ($r = .31, p < .05$). Additionally, young people who had been exposed to traumatic events were more likely to be depressed ($r = .32, p < .05$). Ajduković (1998) hypothesized that these factors likely led to an increase in school problems and dropout.

A number of small and large research studies with former child soldiers in Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Uganda have documented high prevalence of psychological trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomatology, and social dislocation among former child soldiers.⁶ Traumatic stress reactions and the associated responses likely make former child soldiers more prone to feelings of revenge and less open to reconciliation, factors that likely have an effect on the success of community reintegration. In their study of 169 former child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda, Bayer and colleagues (2007) found associations between higher levels of PTSD symptoms and openness to reconciliation ($\rho = -0.34, p < .001$) as well as revengeful feelings ($\rho = 0.29, p < .001$): "The

⁵See Machel (1996), Peters and Richards (1998), Nicolai and Triplehorn (2003), Betancourt (2005), Williamson (2005), and Wessells (2006b).

⁶See Goodwin-Gill and Cohn (1994), Derluyn et al. (2004), Annan and Blattman (2006), and Honwana (2006).

children with PTSD symptoms might regard acts of retaliation as an appropriate way to recover personal integrity and to overcome their traumatic experiences” (558).

In Their Own Words: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Former Child Soldiers

Sample

The data presented here represent one segment of a large mixed-methods research study on the psychosocial adjustment of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone begun by the first author in collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2002. Data were collected in 2002 and again in 2003–4, with a third wave of data collection launched in April 2008. In 2002, the initial sample was obtained using a purposive sampling strategy.⁷ Data were collected on 260 former RUF youth, 88 percent males and 12 percent females. These youth were compared to a randomly selected sample of 135 youth from the same communities as the former child soldiers.

In 2003–4, follow-up surveys were collected with 60 percent ($n = 156$) of the original sample. In addition to survey data, individual interviews were conducted with 31 key informants, selected from the upper and lower quartiles of baseline psychosocial adjustment scores (see table A1, available in the online version of *Comparative Education Review*), and 10 focus group interviews were carried out involving 90 male and female participants (see table A2, available online).⁸ Respective caregivers available at the time of the child (key informant) interviews were also interviewed ($n = 12$). A total of 120 care-givers and community members in the Kono, Kenema, Bo, and Bombali districts also participated in focus groups (see table A3, available online), including eight focus groups with caregivers of former RUF children and nine focus groups with community members and caregivers of non-RUF youth.⁹

Data Collection

Data were collected via interviews conducted by a team of Sierra Leonean research assistants who received training in ethics, basic research design, and interviewing skills. A semistructured interview protocol was followed for all key informant and focus group participants. Questions were open ended, and probe questions were used to clarify information and obtain further detail as necessary. The interview protocol was translated and then back translated from English to Sierra Leonean Krio to ensure cultural appropriateness and clarity for use with former child soldiers. All qualitative interviews were audio taped and transcribed into Sierra Leonean Krio and then translated into English.

Interview questions regarding war-related exposures were worded in a more general way, so as to avoid making children feel pressured to discuss extremely traumatic events. Social workers traveled with the research team to provide follow-up for any participants who experienced distress during the interview or who required further attention due to concerns about immediate risk of harm that was mentioned during the interview.

⁷IRC registries were pooled to create a list of all youth who had been processed through Interim Care Centers in Bo, Kenema, and Kono districts during the most active period of demobilization, from June 2001 to February 2002. These lists were screened to make sure that they included only former RUF adolescents originally from Sierra Leone. Further screening criteria excluded any youth who were above the self-reported age of 18 or had been identified as having a severe physical or cognitive disability that would impair their participation in the study (Betancourt et al. 2005).

⁸This wave of in-depth data collection was made possible through generous support from the USAID Displaced Children and Orphans Fund.

⁹Purposeful selection was employed to construct a focus group sample comprising a range of ages, living situations, and participation in DDR programs.

Data Analysis

Analysis of individual interview and focus group data collected in 2003–4 began with category construction informed by grounded theory methods (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We began with an “open coding” process, whereby the data were explored without making any prior assumptions about what might be discovered. All English transcripts were reviewed upon completion, and initial codes were suggested by the data itself. Some theory-driven categories and codes—related to individual, family, and community resources involved in the social reintegration and psychosocial adjustment of young people in adversity (Lazarus and Folkman 1984)—were included to complement the grounded theory-derived categories. Next, we developed a code-book and applied it with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). Data in the form of direct quotes from participants were sorted to substantiate categories and themes. Quotes from multiple informants were used to triangulate findings. Where counts are presented in the results section, they refer only to spontaneous mentions of the topic during key informant interviews.

Results

War-Related Experiences and Traumas

Understanding the experiences of child soldiers during the civil war is critical to understanding their experiences when reintegrating into their communities and attaining their educational and other life goals. It is important to note that in general, children did not choose to join the RUF. The most frequently given reason for their participation in the group was that they were abducted or otherwise forcibly conscripted. Many related that their families were in hiding in the bush when they were ambushed by rebel forces. Others were abducted during attacks on their home villages. The circumstances of such abductions often included other potentially traumatic events, such as witnessing killing or violence against parents or loved ones: “When [the rebels] attacked us here, we ran away and hid ourselves but they eventually found all of us. Because I was a boy, I was commanded not to move or else they would shoot me. They told us that they needed people to join them. My father started to cry and told them that I was his only son. He asked them not to kill me, but they threatened to kill me. My father tried to beg them but they would not listen. ... I was sad when they took me away” (older adolescent male, Bombali). “All of us were captured and marched to the barry. Some ran away; others were unable. Those who were marched to the barry were organized in [such] a way that the children were in one line and adults in the other. Then they began to cut the throats of the adults” (younger adolescent male, Kono). A few children joined the rebel forces as a survival strategy. Although these children were not necessarily held at gunpoint and forced to join, they felt that they could not avoid eventual involvement in the war and independently enlisted rather than wait to be abducted or killed during rebel attacks. In some cases, joining the RUF was also seen as an alternative to starvation since many families lacked reliable access to food during the war. As one older male adolescent from Bombali recounted, “It was not easy to get food at that time. When we were with our parents the issue of food was a problem. The desire for food made us, the young men, decide to join [the RUF].”

During their time with the RUF, children faced many physical difficulties and risks. The vast majority of former child soldiers of both genders said that their main duties were to carry heavy loads and to help with other camp-related jobs such as cooking and laundering; indeed, children often acted as domestic slaves for specific RUF officers or their wives. The children reported that they were “seriously working” to an exhausting degree and were beaten if they failed to accomplish their tasks quickly enough. Girls faced frequent rape at the hands of male RUF members, sometimes resulting in physical injury or unwanted pregnancy; although interviewers did not raise this issue specifically, four female participants in key informant interviews (40 percent of females) reported being raped during their time with fighting forces.

Children of both genders were forced to take drugs, although boys mentioned this experience more frequently than girls. One younger adolescent male from Bombali said, “I was smoking when we were in the bush. At that time they told us that we just had to take it to harden our hearts and minds.” Another admitted, “I was injected with cocaine.”

Among the many emotional difficulties that child combatants endured during the war, the most frequently voiced were separation from parents or caregivers, concern over setbacks in education and moral development, and constant fear. An older adolescent female from Kono reported, “I was sad that I was not with my family. ... I cried all the time. I thought they had killed my mother, and I was worried that I would never see my family again.” An older adolescent male from Kono echoed, “I was not with any of my relatives and I was suffering. ... I was never happy and always thought of how I could return to my parents.” Both adult and child participants agreed that separations were the greatest psychological challenge they faced.

With the peace accords signed in 2001, a process of reintegration began for many children who passed through formal DDR programs. An important part of this reintegration process was services provided by interim care centers. Williamson (2005) has described the central elements of such programs. For those children who did suffer stigma, several factors helped to reduce or eliminate this problem. Among the most effective of these were NGO sensitization programs as well as initiatives by community members (e.g., organizing cleansing ceremonies) and children (exhibiting good behavior to demonstrate that they were not violent people). Such dynamics were frequently described in our interviews: “[The NGO] advised us that although these children had committed atrocities, we should still accept them and [they] should be placed in formal schools or vocational institutions. Although we were reluctant to accept them, [the NGO] advised us that for peace to be sustained we had to forgive them. We performed a ceremony on their behalf, and we were able to accept them back in the community. Now we all work together” (community member, Kono). “When [community members] tell us to do something, we do it and also help them. They tell us that we have changed, and they no longer accuse us of having come from the bush” (younger adolescent male, Bombali).

In addition to formal programs, many village elders, families, and others independently encouraged reconciliation when former child soldiers, providing a similar impulse for forgiveness as the NGO sensitization programs. As one younger female adolescent from Kono reported, “My grandmother stopped them [from calling me names]. She told people that what happened was not my fault, as I was captured. She [also] reported [the matter] to the chief. [Now] I feel fine.”

Importance and Benefits of Education

One of the strongest areas of agreement among young people and care-givers was the importance of education in the reintegration and psychosocial adjustment of former child soldiers. Seventy-five percent of the caregivers interviewed said that if they were designing a reintegration program for former child soldiers, they would make education a focal point. Education, particularly skills training, was seen as an equalizer by one caregiver, who said, “I know if he [a former child soldier] learns a trade, his future will be just as bright as any other child who was not captured.” Of the 31 young key informants interviewed, 28 stated that they strongly valued education. For example, an older adolescent female from Kono noted, “The most important aspect that should be given priority is education, because lots of children are not attending school since their return, but have gone back to the street.” Providing educational opportunities for former child soldiers was seen as a means for improving social cohesion and reversing some of the moral corruption that youth had faced. As an older male adolescent from Kono expressed it, “The community becomes happy when they see us engage in productive activities such as schooling, trading, mining, or farming. However, if you are stubborn and

unsettled, they get worried.” An older adolescent male from Kono confirmed that, when he and other young people returned, “we were accepted because we were sent to school.”

For many children in Sierra Leone, the war destroyed friendships and peer networks through migration as well as death. Peer support appeared to be a powerful force in the reintegration process, and schools provided an important place for youth to interact. An older adolescent from Kono explained why education was important to her: “Through the help from NGOs, we continued school so I could interact with my friends ... so I would not be depressed and discouraged.” However, schools also were a source of stress for young people encountering stigma. Compared to other adults interviewed for our study, caregivers of former child soldiers were more likely to cite stigma as a significant obstacle facing returning children. Moreover, young people frequently mentioned stigma as a problem upon their return.

Teachers sometimes played a leadership role in helping former child soldiers to counteract stigma. Some respondents described name-calling as a major issue but pointed out how trusted people in the community, including teachers, stepped in to calm tensions. As a caregiver from Kono described, “The child now fits well in the community. At first, he was provoked because he had the RUF tattoo on his body, but the teacher intervened and now he is not provoked. He didn’t like to go to school [before the teacher intervened] but now he is comfortable in school.” Among former child soldiers, a younger male adolescent from Kono had a similar experience: “When we returned back home, some people are happy; they accepted us. ... They never rejected us because it was not our wish [to be involved with the rebels]. But along the way, they started calling us rebels. ... In school, my friends provoked me.” Despite these difficulties, he relied on teachers to end such treatment. “Whenever they called me [names], I usually explained the matter to our teachers, so they advised them not to do so.” Thus, it was not only the presence of educational opportunities that was important to former child soldiers but also the availability of schools that fostered tolerance and reconciliation and facilitated positive peer interaction.

Challenges to Attaining Education

Despite the strong desire of most of the former child soldiers to pursue educational opportunities, significant structural barriers existed. School fees were a major topic of concern for youth and their caregivers. Concerns over paying for school fees and materials were voiced in 55 percent of the key informant interviewees. When asked why she was not in school, an older female adolescent from Pujehun simply stated, “There is no money to pay my fees.” Caregivers shared this concern. For instance, a caregiver in Kono participating in a focus group emphasized, “Paying my children’s school fees is a problem, as I do not have anybody helping me. My husband ... is dead. One of my children could not complete his fifth form because of lack of money.” Of the 31 youth interviewed, 10 (32 percent) reported that they had received school fee support from NGOs; 15 (48 percent) reported receiving school-related items including books, uniforms, and school bags but not school fees, and 6 (19 percent) said that NGO assistance was trivial (i.e., soap and two packs of biscuits) or that they had never received any help.

While those who were receiving school-related assistance from NGOs were generally grateful for it, they still expressed concerns because the amount offered was not always enough to cover the various costs of schooling. For example, an older male adolescent from Kono remarked, “For now things seems to be better. But my only problem is with my education, as my parents are very poor. Even though [the NGO] is doing its best, my parents need to help.” Furthermore, 14 of the 31 key informants said that NGO aid had been inconsistent, and many of the youth who were receiving aid were also afraid it would end. A younger female adolescent from Kenema said, “I am worried about my school fees. School fees are very expensive in secondary school, and I have been told that [the NGO] will stop their support in December. In my quiet

moments I wonder when I will see my father. He used to pay our fees, but we do not know his whereabouts.”

When children were able to attend school, the poor physical condition and resource levels of the schools made it difficult for them to concentrate on learning. As one member of a focus group of adolescents reported, “Even the roof leaks, so when it rains all the classrooms are soaked. ... If you visit these schools, you see that there are not enough benches and school materials. Sometime ago, [an NGO] supplied some books but that was not enough.” And another described the limited number of benches: “The problem we have now is that most of our children are going to school but there is not enough space. Some go to school with their benches, while others have to sit on the classroom floor.”

Attracting and retaining quality teachers in community schools was a stressor discussed in the focus groups as well as in the individual interviews. Teachers frequently did not receive their salaries from the government and thus were paid by community collection or did not hold classes. One younger male adolescent reported that his teachers had “abandoned the schools for 2 weeks.” A focus group member explained: “Education in this area is very poor as we don’t have trained and qualified teachers. Teachers don’t like coming here because their salaries are not paid. As a result, even when our own [young people] finish college, they prefer staying in the big towns.” While many respondents were upset over this issue, others showed an understanding of the difficult situation faced by teachers: “The teachers are doing their best. Though some schools do not have enough teachers, we have volunteer teachers.”

The young people in the study were also concerned about being over age for their level of education, a point mentioned by 17 of the 31 (55 percent) key informants. A younger female adolescent from Kenema explained how it made her feel to have missed years of education. “I also feel sad when I see my peers in senior secondary school and I am still in junior secondary school. If it was not for the war, I would also have been [there].” An older male adolescent from Kono felt that his experiences during the war had not only stopped the progression of his education but also caused him to backslide: “The war affected my mind; it put my education backwards, making me feel too big to go back to school.” Some of the respondents were so far behind that they were unlikely to catch up. One male former child soldier who was at least 19 years old at the time of the interview had been with the RUF for 6 years. He said, “I was not happy, because I was taken away from my family to a place I never knew. My education was affected, because I should not be in form one now but in form five or six.” Even in form 6, he would have been greatly over age.

Girls who became pregnant were at high risk of dropping out of school or, at the very least, falling even further behind their peers. Many abducted girls experienced years of sexual violence, with some becoming the “bush wives” of their captors. Some girls returned to their villages with children, while poverty and a history of sexual violation left others vulnerable to further exploitation after the war. One older female former child soldier from Pujehun was forced to drop out of school when she became pregnant and the NGO that had been supporting her would no longer pay her school fees: “At that time [when I returned], they [NGOs] gave me books and some other things, but they do not care for me now. They said that I am pregnant ... but the child is no longer with me, and I want to continue my education.”

Some caregivers and community focus group members seemed to think it was too late for older former child soldiers to return to school, either because they were over age or because their experiences during the war had changed them so dramatically. One focus group member from Kono told of her struggle with her son: “The war has made a lot of children lose interest in education. Most of them have refused to go back to school. Like my child, for example, I have done all I can to encourage [him] to return to school, but he has refused. Recently he brought

a woman who he introduced to me as his wife. The best that can be done for them now is to establish institutions where they can learn a trade.” In contrast to the interviews with youth, adult interviewees were more likely to promote the idea that former child soldiers were best suited to vocational education. As an adult focus group member expressed it, “The best thing for them now is to establish vocational institutes where they can learn a trade. The girls should do things like gara tie-dye and soap making.” However, many of the former child soldiers perceived vocational skills training as inferior to regular schooling.

Evidence of Mental Health Problems That May Hinder Educational Progress

Many of our participants reported persistent psychological distress or trauma relating to their activities and experiences during the war. Problems discussed by children interviewed included nightmares, intense sadness, and recurring, intrusive thoughts and images centering on the violence that they participated in or saw during the war. The psychological challenges faced by some children resemble hallmark symptoms of PTSD and other traumatic stress reactions. Current psychological distress or worries were mentioned spontaneously in 11 of the 31 (32 percent) former child soldiers key informant interviews as well as by youth participants in focus groups. For example:

- “My mother was killed [in front of me], and I was left crying and confused” (younger female adolescent focus group participant, Kono).
- “When I remember the war I become worried. I think about the way [my sister] was raped and killed” (younger female adolescent focus group participant, Bombali).
- “Whenever I think of my father and mother I feel sad and resort to doing things I’m not supposed to do” (older adolescent male interviewee, Bo).
- “Education came to a standstill. The RUF killed people and therefore created so much fear in [us] and made me think of my parents all the time. I have suffered from mental stress since then” (younger adolescent female interviewee, Kono).
- “Even among my friends I become violent and get annoyed over trivial issues” (older adolescent male interviewee, Bo).

Interestingly, adults—caregivers and community members—did not mention trauma or the burden of traumatic experiences on children during interviews, suggesting that perhaps awareness of these issues or comfort in discussing them differs dramatically between younger and older people in our sample.

The former child soldiers reported that they used several strategies for coping with their “worries.” Most of these coping strategies involve the children’s social network of family, friends, and community elders. When asked how they made themselves feel better when they became worried or upset, almost half of the adolescent key informants said that they talked with or asked advice from their caregivers. A similar portrait is painted by the adult key informants, three-quarters of whom reported that they advised and encouraged their children in order to cheer them up when they felt sad or anxious. One caregiver explained, “What helps children not to be anxious or depressed is when they have someone caring for them. . . . Just to talk to [them] and say encouraging words.” Another caregiver stated, “[When my son is troubled], I give him what he wants. But if I do not have it, I will talk to him and encourage him.”

Many of the former child soldiers also spoke of spending time with their friends as a strategy for dealing with painful memories that upset them:

- “I only feel better when I am studying or when my friends and I share ideas together. I usually say that studying is a source of encouragement. I know that if I am educated

I will be successful and people will appreciate me” (older female adolescent, Kenema).

- “Whenever I am depressed, I play with my friends and when playing the depression leaves” (older female adolescent, Kenema).
- “When I am depressed, my friends come by and ask me to explain what is wrong. After explaining, they will say nice things that will encourage you and make you feel better” (older female adolescent, Kenema).
- “[I’m feeling] fine now, because I go to school with other children and play with my friends. ... Things are normal now” (older female adolescent, Kenema).

Compared to the youth interviewed, caregivers were less likely to highlight the contribution of peer interaction and support in helping their children to cope with their painful memories and sad feelings.

Hopes for the Future and the Way Forward

Despite a traumatic past and the challenges that they faced in their daily lives, these former child soldiers wanted to counter their hardships by becoming well educated and assuming leadership roles in society. Of the 31 adolescent key informants, 17 (55 percent) mentioned that they want to become professionals—including doctors, nurses, lawyers, journalists, and teachers. An older male adolescent from Kono said, “My education is the most important thing in my life. I want to be educated and become a prominent person in the future.” A younger male adolescent from Moyamba suggested that it was important to educate former child soldiers because “it is possible that among them there will be ministers, presidents, or paramount chiefs, and such people will be able to help develop our country.” As a whole, the young respondents’ comments about the future were overwhelmingly positive. Only a few seemed to believe that their futures were out of their hands. An older male adolescent from Kono, for instance, stated, “Right now my father is old and there is no one to care for him except me. My future is in the hands of God. If he says I will succeed it will come to pass.”

The caregiver interviews showed a greater range of feelings about the future for former child soldiers. While seven of the 12 (58 percent) caregivers interviewed reported wanting their children to be educated, they acknowledged the barriers more clearly than did the young people. Caregivers were more critical of their charges’ performance in school than the children themselves, emphasizing that merely attending school was not enough to ensure success. As one caregiver noted, “His younger brother is in form six, and he is in either form one or two. Do you think he will be able to achieve much?” Another commented, “He does not do well in school and will not improve even if he is in school for a thousand years.” Caregivers were mixed on whether former child soldiers could succeed in life to the same extent as children who were not abducted. One caregiver expressed this ambivalence well: “[Children] who did not go anywhere [i.e., to war] can make it in life. Some children were with them [the rebels] and did not do anything. Some children killed their relatives. Every day [family members] pray for that child; for even if the child becomes rich he will never have peace. But those who did not go with them [the rebels] will always be better.”

Discussion

The statements made by our interviewees and the importance they placed on educational opportunities can only be evaluated in the context of the Sierra Leonean school system. Sierra Leone has taken steps forward since the end of the war, from rebuilding destroyed schools to closing the gender gap in primary school enrollment (Statistics Sierra Leone 2006a). However,

serious barriers to education remain, especially for those who have missed a number of years of school, as did the former child soldiers in our study.

Education alone cannot solve the problems of former child soldiers. Traumatic experiences often result in symptoms that make it difficult for children to fully benefit from educational and training opportunities (Layne et al. 2001). Currently, the vast majority of schools in Sierra Leone do not offer the integrated psychosocial services necessary to effectively support war-affected children. Support must be widely available to youth because the psychological effects of trauma can emerge years after exposure (Sinclair 2002). Although many former child soldiers do well with family and community support as their primary coping resources, additional services are needed to screen and provide care for young people who experience persistent distress and functional impairment (Betancourt 2008; Betancourt and Williams 2008). Communities in postconflict situations need social services systems that can be maintained long after NGOs have left and emergency support programs have closed down. Schools are a natural location to offer preventative services and screening, as teachers come into contact with most of the children in the community (Betancourt 2005).

Education systems can provide services of several types through regular activities. Through their study of Sierra Leonean adolescents in a refugee camp in Sinje, Liberia, Kline and Mone (2003) determined that three characteristics were critical for healthy psychosocial recovery from the effects of war: maintenance of an intact sense of purpose, effective control of traumatic memories, and successful protection against destructive social isolation. As discussed above, education and training can help former child soldiers to define goals for the future and redevelop a sense of purpose in life (Betancourt 2005). Schools and training programs can also meet the needs of former child soldiers by helping to prevent social isolation and stigma. While most Sierra Leonean schools are poorly equipped to deal with individual psychological needs, peers can be a vital source of support, and screening and referral networks can be developed.

Many youth in postconflict situations have lost family members, friends, neighbors, or others who provided social support before the war, either due to death or separation. Schools naturally create peer groups for young people outside of their extended families and, for former child soldiers, the groups they may have lived with in the bush. In some contexts, this new peer group may be composed of other former child soldiers in an accelerated education program, and in other contexts peers may be local children, who may or may not have been affected by the war, in a traditional school. In their research on former child soldiers in Uganda, Annan and Blattman (2006) suggest that the support of friends helps child soldiers who have experienced severe violence to maintain moderate to high levels of functionality upon returning to civilian life. In addition, peers can demonstrate or validate various adaptive strategies, which may increase a child's coping capacities and overall adjustment.

While the areas discussed above can be addressed through the normal activities of schools, teachers and counselors should also be explicitly trained to promote positive coping techniques that will equip young people to deal with the mental and emotional consequences of war. In this manner, the UN Inter-agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings underscore the importance of schools as a part of the holistic psychosocial response necessary for assisting war-affected youth (IASC 2007). This aspect of professional development is also highlighted in the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies' recently developed Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises, and Early Reconstruction (INEE 2004). These standards state, "All education personnel, formal and non-formal, should be trained in recognising signs of distress in learners and steps to take to address and respond to this behaviour in the learning environment. Referral mechanisms should be clearly outlined for education personnel to provide additional support to learners who exhibit severe distress" (58).

Learning how to regulate strong emotions and deal with traumatic stress reactions such as concentration problems and flashbacks is critical for youth who have survived war violence to benefit from education and training programs (Gupta and Zimmer 2008). While extensive individual therapy for youth may be inappropriate or prohibitively expensive, intensive short-term teacher training could give teachers skills in handling sensitive topics with students in the classroom. Such training might also help teachers to instruct students in concrete strategies to deal with frustration, stress, and anger.

Long-term interventions should include maintaining a comfortable and inclusive school environment for the children that is responsive to psychosocial needs. Based on experiences in other postconflict environments, some NGO experts recommend that teachers employ less authoritarian methods of discipline in the classroom; use open-ended questions to “encourage the participation of all children, even of those who may be passive and withdrawn due to their experiences”; and organize recreational and expressive activities, while acknowledging that different strategies may need to be adopted for children who “are confrontational as an aftermath of trauma” (Gupta and Zimmer 2008, 67–68). Dealing with psychosocial problems in school contexts means dedicating time to healing. In the immediate aftermath of a conflict such as Sierra Leone’s, educators can facilitate psychosocial recovery for all children, regardless of combatant status, by devoting adequate time during the school day to healing activities. For example, in 1999, Plan International, UNESCO’s Institute of Education (Hamburg), and Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Youth, Education, and Sports developed a two-pronged response for educating internally displaced children. This included study sessions in the mornings and trauma-healing activities (structured activities such as arts, music, drama, sports, local games, and dance) in the afternoons (Sinclair 2002). There is also evidence that effective mental health interventions can be delivered in school environments to treat more severe problems such as depression and traumatic stress reactions (Woodside et al. 1999; Layne et al. 2001; Gupta and Zimmer 2008).

Steps Forward for Sierra Leone and Other Postconflict Countries

Since the end of the war, Sierra Leone has made progress on a number of educational indicators, including enrollment and gender parity at the primary level. However, large numbers of children and youth remain out of school and most drop out before finishing secondary school. As a stabilizing force, education has great potential for helping heal past traumas and preventing future conflict. However, such benefits are only possible if children enroll and stay in school long enough to gain skills to make them economically productive and to receive the social and emotional supports they need. Youth who have no access to constructive activities may be vulnerable to re-recruitment into armed groups still active within the region (Stichick and Bruderlein 2001). For education to be an intrinsic part of reintegration, access to education must be sustainable and not just stopgap in nature. Countries emerging from conflict must focus on the following three areas in education in order to recover and move forward:

- First, education must be a funding priority, both for governments and for international donors and aid organizations.
- Second, specific programs, for example, condensing (quality) primary schooling into a shorter period, should be designed to meet the educational lags and barriers facing youth, whether they were abducted or not.
- Third, psychosocial support and referral networks for youth experiencing significant symptoms and impairment must be integrated into education systems in conflict-affected countries.¹⁰

It is unrealistic to expect that a postconflict country can immediately rebuild schools, offer a full range of psychological counseling and services, and meet the individualized needs of every

student. However, these areas must be goals toward which the government, international (multilateral and bilateral) agencies, and NGOs can work in concert. To date, the international community has failed to provide sufficient, sustained resources for educational opportunities. Our data underline the many ways in which education presents a positive pathway for these former child soldiers and all war-affected youth in Sierra Leone. However, to date, this pathway has been too limited to benefit these young people in a meaningful way. This devastating reality is a policy recipe for a “lost generation.” Failing to respond rapidly in Sierra Leone and in similar postconflict environments means writing off a generation of youth who have experienced war—a generation whose ambitions for education and a better life could serve as a catalyst for the construction of a more peaceful society.

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¹⁰Governments and international donors—likely in collaboration with international and local NGOs—must devote sufficient financial and human funds to integrate education systems with systems of health and social services, including mental health outreach and screening services (Betancourt 2008).

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