

# Policyweekly

Youth Bulge, Governance and Security in Post-conflict Sierra Leone



## Policy Recommendations

- 1 There should be institutionalised educational training focusing on practical skills.
- 2 Graduates of skill training programmes should be allowed tax holidays in their first few years of establishing their businesses, except those who go into paid jobs.
- 3 Sports should be used to harness talents in the country, primarily through sports academies.
- 4 Donors, civil society organisations, and the government should lean towards the rights-based civic and democracy education model to build citizenship with skills to robustly explore the formal avenues for making demands on the government about their needs, transparency, and accountability.
- 5 The fight against drugs should be heightened, while rehabilitation should be a top priority.
- 6 Both government and development assistance agencies should undertake further security sector reform to curb corruption, strengthen law-enforcement institutions, and strengthen the state's regulative capacity.
- 7 The elite should not be contented in its economic stagnation and poverty equilibrium but instead resolving development challenges.

## Introduction

The youth bulge is the relatively large increase in the proportion of a country's population that is young. The African Youth Charter recognises every person aged between 15 and 35 as belonging to the youth cohort. This age bracket is characterised by strength, intelligence, innovation, drive, and adventure. These elements mark them as critical potential agents of change and development. However, the potential of the youth in development is double-edged, in the sense that if it is not harnessed correctly, it could strain development capability.

Africa is the continent with the highest youth bulge, as over 60 per cent of its 1.4 billion population is under the age of 25 years. Sierra Leone is part of the story of the youth bulge on the continent. 74.5 per cent of its population is made up of young people

under the age of 35 years. Also, [65 per cent](#) of the youth population within the employment age do not have access to secure and sustainable jobs. This creates a burden for governance and a significant risk for security as Sierra Leone emerged from two civil wars 22 years ago and restored elective rule during the same period. In its need for reconstruction and development, the country was the first beneficiary of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), which deployed funding to support [programmes](#) for capacity building, democracy, good governance, justice, security and youth employment. While there are multiple components of peacebuilding, the fundamentals must include access to basic facilities like water, education, healthcare and opportunities. Despite the commendable efforts at peacebuilding in post-war Sierra Leone, opportunities are still limited. The current situation of the lack of opportunities for youths is concerning. A direct relationship exists between declining livelihood chances and the rising youth population. Logically connected with the lack of opportunities are poverty and hunger. Sierra Leone's dismal [ranking of 116 out of 125 in the 2023 Global Hunger Index](#) means potential security challenges that create a major burden for governance. In this edition of the Nextier SPD Policy Weekly, we explore the security implications of the youth bulge in Sierra and proffer options on the thrusts of governance for solutions to the challenges.

### **Neglect of Youth Bulge and Poor Governance: A Recipe for Crises**

A Sierra Leonean scholar, Ismail Rashid, noted that while there has been widespread youth unemployment in

post-war Sierra Leone, there has not been large-scale youth destitution. The country's youths have been resourceful in engaging in petty trading, street-hawking, driving okada (motorbike), taxis, and other transport services (see [Adebajo, 2021](#)). However, some of these jobs are insecure and unsustainable. The consequences that follow a precarious existence for the young are enormous. The growing vulnerabilities of the youth, according to Bangura ([2016](#)), had in the past and could again in the future lead to their mobilisation as agents of violence. The electoral violence of [2007](#) and [2012](#) [and, indeed, the rising levels of violence](#) have a causal link with the youths' poor material conditions. Indeed, [the marginalisation](#) of the youth underpinned the origins, conducts and consequences of the country's eleven-year civil war. The [RUF fighters](#) were comprised mostly of radicalised young leftist students and other 'lumpen' youths. Their further recruitments targeted disillusioned youths and children who also served as combatants in the civil war. Their target was to fight the injustices of the ruling group and the nature of value allocation with its embedded corruption by the elite. However, in prosecuting that war, their modus operandi flouted several conventions of warfare.

In Bangura's account of the post-civil war international peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, the programme focused on [quick-impact projects](#) that provided cash and food to the ex-combatants. In terms of infrastructure, it promoted the construction of schools, healthcare facilities, feeder roads, and boreholes. At the end of the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programme, most ex-combatants left because the

skills it offered could not provide jobs sufficient for their livelihood. As the generation of young people who fought the civil war gets older, the emerging form of violence in Sierra Leone is urban gangs and cliques. Mitton (2022) reveals that a loose collection of teenage social groups have merged under the umbrella of three main gangs, including Members of Blood (MOB), Crips, and So So Black. These groups made an adaptation of the American gang culture. They have command hierarchies, and each claims jurisdiction over some defined territory. The cliques or gangs in the capital are the new generation of urban rebels whose modus vivendi is characterised by violent rivalries and clashes.

The emergent youth gangs in Freetown are reported by the [Africa Organised Crime Index 2023](#) to engage in petty crime and street-level drug dealing and maintain relationships with politicians and political parties. Politicians use them during election periods. To make things worse, politicians and security agencies are part of the complex web of emerging crimes and youth violence because politicians have links with cliques. At the same time, the police collect [bribes](#) for inaction. There is a general increase in robberies, home invasions, and assaults. The linkage of governance structures with rising youth crimes makes any search for solutions challenging. The entire problems emanating from poorly directed youth bulge tend to bear a high prospect of continuity because the state is weak while emerging forms of youth organising for violence are cohesive, systematic and more determined. Most importantly, the post-conflict peacebuilding intervention of the past two decades has been swamped by

worsening socio-economic conditions and consequent youth violence.

## Recommendations

Following the above developments, we advance the following recommendations as remedial pathways for the problem of youth bulge and their neglect:

1. There should be institutionalised educational training focusing on practical skills. One such institution in Liberia, Booker Washington Institute, is devoted to skill training and entrepreneurial development. Such institutions should focus on relevant skills with market demand within and beyond Sierra Leone. The state should subsidise the programme, with an opening for donor assistance with funding and technical support.
2. Graduates of skill training programmes should be allowed tax holidays in their first few years of establishing their businesses, except those who go into paid jobs.
3. Sports should be used to harness talents in the country, primarily through sports academies. Those who find interest and have capacities can be trained and supported to make sports their profession.
4. Donors, civil society organisations, and the government should lean towards the rights-based civic and democracy education model to build citizenship with skills to robustly explore the formal avenues for making demands on the government about their needs, transparency, and accountability. Such training,

if implemented with commitment, will mitigate violence and show how citizens can hold the government accountable without being violent.

5. Urban crimes and violence in the country are heavily supported by drug peddling and use among young persons. This situation has made it difficult for many youths to want to engage in useful vocation. The fight against drugs should be heightened, while rehabilitation should be a top priority.
6. Both government and development assistance agencies should undertake further security sector reform to curb corruption, strengthen law-enforcement institutions, and strengthen the state's regulative capacity.
7. As argued by Stefan Dercon in his book "Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose", as part of its development bargain, there must be an elite consensus or bargain that deliberately and strategically tackles the issues emerging from youth bulge. The elite should not be contented in its economic stagnation and poverty equilibrium but instead resolving development challenges.

## Conclusion

Sierra Leone faces the demographic crises of youth bulge and an absence of corresponding governance efforts to harness the potential and mitigate its dangers. Youth bulge and unresponsive state were part of the background factors of the eleven-year civil war. It is also the driver of electoral violence and emerging

forms of urban violence, especially by cliques and gangs of young people. With the country's economic outlook and poor state capacity, there is a danger of further unfolding the downside of youth bulge in the country. However, there are policy directions that could systematically and gradually minimise the issues. Centrally, we recommend education for skills, rights-based civic education to popularise formal ways of engaging the government, and security sector reforms to target corruption and lack of professionalism.

## References

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