



YOUNG PEOPLE IN SIERRA LEONE TODAY

**CHALLENGES, ASPIRATIONS,
EXPERIENCES**

**A state of the youth report compiled
by Restless Development Sierra Leone**

May 2012

**RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT**
THE YOUTH-LED DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

FOREWORD

Having a clear understanding of the issues affecting young people is essential for any practitioner, be it government or civil society, to be able to design and implement effective and impactful interventions.

It is in that spirit that I welcome this report from Restless Development which provides a useful overview of the issues most salient to young people in Sierra Leone today. Researched and written by young people themselves, this piece of youth-led research combines secondary data and in-depth focus group discussions and interviews with state and non-state stakeholders and most importantly of all, the young people of Sierra Leone themselves, to give an accurate and up to date picture of the challenges, opportunities and hopes of young people today.

This report comes at an opportune moment for the National Youth Commission as we formulate our first annual report on the status of the youth and the new youth strategy for 2012-2016. It will serve as a useful reference tool both for the Commission and for other government and civil society organizations working on youth issues now and in the future and demonstrates how young people are best placed to identify the issues that face them and can be engaged to identify the most suitable solutions as well.

I therefore applaud and thank Restless Development for their efforts.

Anthony Koroma
Youth Commissioner



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Foreword by National Youth Commissioner

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PREFACE

What is Restless Development?

Restless Development Sierra Leone is a youth-led development agency established in 2005 at the invitation of the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sport. Our vision is a world where young people are taking the lead in the development of their own countries. We focus on three areas which we believe are the most important for young people in Sierra Leone today: sexual and reproductive health, livelihoods and civic participation.

In order to meet our goals in each of these areas, we take five different approaches. We engage in *direct delivery* by training and supporting young Volunteer Peer Educators to organise and deliver behaviour change and awareness raising activities focused on SRH, youth involvement in governance and decision-making and livelihoods. We work to *build a stronger youth sector* by strengthening the organisational and programmatic capacity of local organisations and stakeholders to work effectively with and for youth. We strive to *shape policy and practice* by empowering young people to advocate directly to decision makers on the issues that affect them most. We are committed to *sharing and learning* through the dissemination of our youth-led research and approaches and the incorporation of other's good practice in to our own programmes. We focus on the *generation of leaders* by nurturing talented and committed young people to develop leadership skills and harness leadership opportunities.

The purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to give a voice to young people across Sierra Leone with respect to the key issues affecting their lives today. It reflects the views of over 200 young people, and is supplemented by those of other stakeholders from civil society and government working with and for young people.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report tackles ten individual themes identified by young people as the top priority factors affecting their day to day lives. For each issue, the views of young people regarding the cause and impact of the issue are summarised, as are young people's thoughts around how the issue should be addressed by government and other stakeholders. The views of young people are supplemented by opinions of other stakeholders in government and civil society who work with and for youth. The report also includes some of the key published statistics relating to the ten areas of concern.

In the area of **Education**, young people identify access to secondary education to be a fundamental issue of concern as well as shortage of opportunities at post-secondary (ie tertiary) level. Factors affecting rates of drop out at secondary level are discussed as are the reasons for very low rates of access, and poor employment outcomes for tertiary education.

In the area of **Livelihoods**, young people identify some identical and some differing challenges in urban and rural contexts. They put forward their views for the high rates of youth unemployment in both settings and made suggestions for how government and other stakeholders should intervene.

When it comes to **Civic Participation**, young people's top concerns are the opportunity for youth to contribute to decision-making and young people's positive engagement in the upcoming 2012 elections. Some of the key obstacles are identified and discussed and solutions for overcoming those obstacles are put forward.

In relation to **Sexual and Reproductive Health**, young people identify teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS to be the areas of key concern and put forward their views about how each should be addressed.

Two cross-cutting themes are also identified by young people as being of key priority: **alcohol and drugs** and **disability**. Views about the causes and effects on young people are put forward as are ideas for how the issues should be best addressed by government and civil society.

METHODOLOGY

The data contained in this report was sourced through a combination of primary and secondary research. The research team was headed by two young volunteers from the UK, Tom Baylem and Oliver Nieburg, who were in Sierra Leone for three month voluntary placements with Restless Development Sierra Leone under the DFID-funded International Citizenship Service scheme. Tom and Oliver were supported by a research team of young Sierra Leoneans trained by Restless Development who facilitated focus group discussions and interviews in the various research locations.

Qualitative primary research was collected through 27 focus group discussions (FGDs) held in August 2011 in nine different communities in four districts, four of them in rural areas and five in urban. Researchers held three FGDs in every community. Each FGD included eight young people and up to 16 other members of the community, ensuring an equal gender balance in all cases. Nationally, 216 young people took part in FGDs.

FGD research was substantiated by conducting interviews with key stakeholders working in areas that this report addresses during August 2011. This was supplemented by secondary research in the form of a comprehensive review of the relevant literature.

In September 2011, the report was validated by a sample of young people who had taken part in the original FGDs. Their comments and corrections have been incorporated into this document.

Throughout the definition of youth used by the Government of Sierra Leone (people aged 15-35 years) has been employed. In practice many of the interviewees fell in to the age bracket 15-25 years although some older people were also consulted.



ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CYC	Chieftom Youth Committees/ Councils
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DYC	District Youth Committees/Councils
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GPI	Gender Parity Index
HIV	Human Immuno-deficiency Virus
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
MYES	Ministry of Youth, Employment and Sport
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
UNESCO	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



SECONDARY SCHOOL DROP OUT

How do young people see the problem?

Young people are aware that the rate of secondary school dropouts is overwhelmingly high in all regions. They are also aware that young women tend to drop out earlier than young men, at around 14-15, while for young men the average age to drop out is 16-17.

What do they understand the causes to be?

Young people believe the leading cause of secondary school dropouts is poverty. Many young people simply cannot afford to stay in education because of the cost of books, transport, uniforms and school fees. There are also a number of “hidden fees” such as teachers charging for additional lessons or marking assignments and the fees for retaking exams if failing the first time.

In the case of young people in rural communities, the interviewees shared that the distance to and from school (usually by foot) can also cause dropouts. The poor quality of secondary school education, exacerbated by a lack of qualified teachers, high class numbers and lack of basic materials and equipment, can also cause many young people to lose interest in school and subsequently drop out.

Young people told us that for many the need to work and contribute to family income takes precedence over education so parents often actively encourage their children to work, with many dropping out of school to find work in mining, farming and even prostitution.

In addition to reasons that affect both sexes, it was widely held by the young people surveyed that young women typically drop out due to teenage pregnancy and early marriage. There is also evidence of parental preference to send their sons to school over their daughters, particularly in Waterloo and the North. In contrast to the reasons given by young people themselves, Mohamed Sillah Sesay, Director at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) claims that dropouts are largely caused by a lack of parental supervision and youth impatience and that schools fees are not to blame.

What do they think can be done?

Young people think the onus should be on the Government to ensure secondary school education is extended to as many as possible. They think that the Government should provide grants to provide facilities and monitor spending more closely, and that scholarships should be made available to deserving students, based on merit not influence. They also say that any NGO looking to provide financial assistance for schooling should approach young people directly or such funding will be monopolised by community elders. Additionally, there was a recommendation that there should be incentives for teachers to relocate to rural areas.

“If a family needs to send 5 or 6 children through school, it can be difficult. I had to take a year out before my father could afford to pay for me as I was competing with my brothers and sisters”. **Young man in Makeni**

“The parents of dropouts are often themselves illiterate and see education as an unnecessary expense for their sons and daughters.” **A young man in Kroo Bay**

At a glance...

Net primary school attendance rose from **69 %** in 2005 to **74 %** in 2010.¹

Net attendance ratio for secondary school students was **31%** for males and **35%** for females between 2005-2010.²

There was one teacher for every **31** primary school students in 2009.³

Public expenditure on education was **4.3%** of GDP in 2009.³

The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for primary schools was **1.04** in 2010.⁴

63% of people aged 25-35 have never attended school.⁵



ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

How do young people see the problem?

Young people realise that very few young people (especially young women) attend university. As a result, universities are dominated by older students aged 26-30. Not all schools provide the same opportunities for school leavers to access to university as many lack trained teachers and basic facilities. In particular, few young people study the sciences, which are very expensive courses to take and particularly lacking in departmental resources and practical experience opportunities.

What do they understand the causes to be?

Much like the reasons behind secondary school dropouts, young people understand the overriding cause behind limited access to quality tertiary education to be poverty, with most parents unable to afford to send their children to university (especially if they have already funded schooling).

Many young people complain that there are no scholarships available to study beyond secondary school. The Government offers grant aid, which covers basic tuition fees, but young people believe this is only available to the most able students (and those with political connections) and is not means tested so there is no support for the financially challenged.

Some young people say that they are also deterred by poor graduate job prospects and claim that university qualifications don't tend to make a difference in the job market because employers prefer to give jobs to candidates they already know or those with shared political opinions. Early marriage and teenage pregnancy is one of the main reasons young women are not accessing quality tertiary education. Additionally, some subjects are thought to be inaccessible for women, for example law, because they can't afford it and parents only encourage/pay for sons to be lawyers.

What do they think can be done?

Young people believe the government should create more opportunities for young people to access tertiary education for example by providing more grants or loans for talented students and widening vocational training opportunities. They also believe there needs to be more done to ensure courses are demand-driven and linked to the job market. In addition they believe careers guidance should be provided in secondary schools to inform young people about the opportunities and choices they have in terms of further education and employment/self employment.

"We would relish the opportunity to gain knowledge at university but because we come from poor families we're priced out".

Young woman in Kroo Bay

"Competition for grants is high, so people are tempted to use connections to obtain the few available."

Anthony Koroma, National Youth Commissioner

"I got my grant aid through political connections."

Fourah Bay College student, Freetown

At a glance...

Sierra Leone has **2** universities and **3** polytechnics with constituent campuses and **2** teacher training colleges. ⁵

2,000 students undertook further education course via distance learning in 2004/5. ⁵

Enrolment in tertiary education more than doubled from **6,000** in 2000 to **16,000** in 2004/5. ⁵

Female students made up **36%** of enrolment in 2004/5. ⁵



URBAN LIVELIHOODS

How do young people see the problem?

Young people are aware that there are high levels of urban unemployment and underemployment, disproportionately affecting young people. Both university graduates and those less educated understand that they face a range of challenges including a lack of demand for labour, a shortage of formal employment opportunities and the lack of linkages between education and training and market demand.

What do they understand the causes to be?

In the opinion of the young people surveyed, one of the main reasons behind high levels of youth unemployment among graduates is misguided subject choices. While law, engineering, medicine and accountancy offer good employment opportunities after graduation, some of the most popular courses are arts subjects which seldom lead to good jobs.

For those young people not attending university, vocational skills training courses are thought to offer good employment prospects, but many young people see these courses as demeaning and without guaranteed employment at the end. There is also often outdated teaching equipment, and a lack of funds for field visits. This results in a lack of practical experience which makes young people less employable.

For both graduates and non-graduates, IT skills are considered essential to finding a good job in urban environments, but with computer training costing up to Le 100,000 per office programme, it is often not a feasible option. Young people say that, university education or not, it's not what you know it's who you know that helps you secure any kind of employment in Sierra Leone. Most young people perceive nepotism to be commonplace in the labour market. This can take many forms, such as political allegiance or family connections. Bribery of employers, such as offering the first month's salary in return for a job, is also widespread.

What do they think can be done?

Young people believe more should be done to support youths trying to transition in to employment (such as apprenticeship schemes, internships, vocational training linked to specific high-demand trades). They also believe more should be done to enable young people to access capital (such as microfinance) and to start up their own enterprises. Some young people say that IT should be a compulsory part of the national curriculum and employment guidance/counselling should be available for both in school and out of school youth.

“It is easier for employers to demand bribes in return for employment, from young people they have a pre-existing relationship with.”

Young woman in Koidu

“Basic careers advice and CV writing and interview skills practice is needed. It is common for a graduate to come out of university having received absolutely no careers guidance”.

**Keith Wright, former
Technical Advisor at UNDP**

“Political allegiance is often a factor in selecting employees, particularly for office jobs”.

Young man in Makeni

At a glance...

Employers perceive people between **18-24** as being less reliable, less trustworthy, less hard working, less cooperative and less skilled than adults. ⁶

More than **50%** of young people in urban areas are unpaid workers. ⁶

17% of urban youths aged 15-35 are unemployed. ⁷

Only **9%** of the workforce are in formal employment. ⁷

The mining sector accounts for **1.4%** of employment. ⁶



RURAL LIVELIHOODS

How do young people see the problem?

Rural livelihoods options are limited for young people. Young people see farming as the main (and sometimes only) choice in rural communities in the North and South, followed by petty trading, ocada driving and charcoal burning. In the East, mining is a common alternative. Many young people are migrating to urban areas in search of more lucrative careers which often evade them. Young women have particularly poor livelihood prospects in rural areas.

What do they see the causes to be?

Young people believe one of the main challenges for young farmers is a lack of access to machinery that would allow them to ease their workload and move beyond subsistence farming. Access to tractors for example is thought to be impossible for young people because of the high cost or control by community elders. The National Youth Commission insists that the Government is doing what it can to provide access to mechanised farming, but with so many young people in rural areas in need of such equipment any intervention would struggle to reach everybody.

There is also limited access to land for young people in rural areas, which young people say is largely controlled by community elders. Both the initial purchase of land and obtaining the means of cultivation are thought to be out of reach for young people who have limited resources compared to elders. In cases where rural people inherit land from their parents, it is usually given to older members of the extended family rather than passing to young people.

There is a high demand from young people to take up alternative livelihoods options to the standard option of farming. However there is a lack of access to training in trades such as tailoring, hairdressing, carpentry and tie-dying. In the case of young women, many do not think they are strong enough to farm agricultural land and they very rarely inherit land. Instead they tend to rely on petty trading or the income of their husbands or male members of their family

What do they think can be done?

Young people believe a lack of access to land and capital needs to be addressed urgently if young people are going to be able to engage in farming or other self-employment opportunities and they feel the government should intervene to make both of these key resources more easily accessible. Young women are particularly disadvantaged by lack of access to key resources so this should be a priority focus. Furthermore training and apprenticeship opportunities should be extended to rural areas and greater support should be given to youth cooperatives which have proven successful in promoting youth livelihoods in rural areas.

“In the city I might only be a manual labourer, but it would still be better than farming”.
Young man in rural Bumpah.

“In the new youth strategic framework for 2012-2016, providing technical assistance such as tractors, processors and IT training through agricultural centres will be a top priority.”
Charles Moinina, Acting Director of Youth at the Ministry of Youth Employment and Sports (MYS)

“There is a tractor in the community but it is controlled by elders.”
Young man in Batkanu.

“All land is owned by families who are not looking to sell.”
Young women in Waterloo.

At a glance...

Less than **50%** of young workers receive payment for their labour, compared with two thirds of adults aged 35 and over.⁶

Agriculture accounts for **70%** of all employment.⁶

More than **70%** of young people in urban areas are unpaid workers.⁶

Only **9%** of farm owners are younger than 35.⁶



YOUTH AND DECISION-MAKING

How do young people see the problem?

Young people perceive that only educated young people tend to be involved in decision-making processes. And even when they are, it tends to be tokenistic. At district and community level, older members of the community make most decisions, despite the recent formation of district youth councils and chiefdom youth committees. At national level, young people also feel excluded and many do not know about bodies such as the National Youth Commission which have been established to increase their representation. Young people, particularly in urban areas, say they are exploited by politicians and used as a tool in politics. Traditional leaders have a great influence on communities but women, young people and children are largely excluded from decision-making. Young people believe Local Councils are playing vital roles in service delivery but have serious institutional and capacity constraints making it difficult for them to meet the expectations of the people.

What do they see the causes to be?

Young people believe there is a lack of knowledge and understanding among young people about what mechanisms are available for them to engage with political processes and decision-making. For example, at district and community levels, most young people do not know about the district youth councils and chiefdom youth committees so even though there is a mechanism in place to provide them with a voice in decision-making processes, they do not know how to use it. This is largely because only those young people who belong to a youth group can participate. But in some communities (such as rural Bumpah) there are no youth groups in the area, so it is impossible to know about and actively participate in DYCs and CYCs. At a national level, young people say they are excluded from decision-making processes because they lack the opportunities, finances and education to participate.

What do they think can be done?

At a district and community level, young people say NGOs and Government need to educate elders that youths should be involved in decision-making. They recommend consultative meetings between young and old, bringing the two together to drive development. At a national level, young people believe they must be involved in the formulation of the new National Youth Policy because any report or policy *on* youth should be informed *by* youth. They also think their participation in decision-making should be guaranteed by law, through enforcing the 10% quota recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.



“Young people are only consulted on inferior matters, and excluded from big decisions.”
Young man in Makeni.

“District Youth Councils (DYCs) and Chiefdom Youth Committees (CYCs) were set up to combat youth exclusion from decision-making”.
Anthony Koroma, National Youth Commissioner

“The vast majority of members are over 25 and have all been through school and many through university. Less educated young people across all regions are under-represented by these bodies.”
DYC members in Bo.

At a glance...

18% of young people who are not attending school are aware of at least one policy that influences their wellbeing (eg. child rights policy, gender bill and girl child education policy).⁸

28% of young people in schools are aware of policies that influence their wellbeing.⁸

16% of young people believe these policies are actually operational in their communities.⁸

38% of young people noted they are aware of community decision making committees with young people's representation.⁸

While **17%** of young people have ever been invited to participate in policy/decision making meetings, only **6%** have attended or participated fully in these meetings.⁸



OUTLOOK ON THE 2012 ELECTIONS

How do young people see the problem?

Although more violence is expected in cities, young people in urban areas are more hopeful about the chances of a peaceful election than youths in rural areas. There are considerable regional variations in youth outlook, some of the reasons for which are explained below.

What do they see the causes to be?

Young people in the North expect a generally peaceful election within their communities due to high levels of sensitisation. Music from Artists for Peace and outreach drama from Restless Development are given as examples of campaigning that is changing the mindset of young people.

In the South, young people in cities like Bo are more optimistic about a peaceful election than those in rural communities. For example, youths in the rural village of Senahun expect political tension within households when they support a rival party to their parents. Young people in Eastern areas anticipate a generally peaceful atmosphere come election time due to sensitisation campaigns by organisations. However, in cases where minor fracas are expected they are often caused by politicians using money to influence youths to commit violent acts.

More violence is anticipated in the West than any other region because politicians promise jobs and other opportunities in exchange for creating disorder and intimidation. They also say that young people are often incited by community elders who make promises should a particular party win.

What do they think can be done?

Young people would like to see NGOs and Government mobilize the youth to sensitize their peers by supporting youth groups with training, materials and transport. Many young people say radio messages and outreach drama help to reach grassroots youth. Some young people suggest calling meetings between young people from each party to advocate for peace.

"I expect the atmosphere among young people to be charged."

Anthony Koroma, National Youth Commissioner.

"The North was the most peaceful region at the last election and we expect this trend to continue."

Young woman in Makeni.

"Young people in the East are often hired by politicians as thugs at elections. There is evidence this happened in Koidu and Tongo at by-elections in 2010, where there was fighting, stabbings and even human faeces thrown at houses."

Alex Amara, Affiliate Director of Ignitus Worldwide (Youth Crime Watch Sierra Leone)

"Politicians can easily manipulate young people by giving them drugs and alcohol and making promises. Youths have no opportunities, so any promise seems attractive, but these promises are never fulfilled. Politicians are so desperate to stay in power that they are willing to resort to these measures".

Andrew Kondoh, Country Director of Advocacy for Youth in Crises

At a glance...

Each of the **11** parliamentary and **5** presidential elections held in Sierra Leone since independence has been attended by youth violence.⁹

6% of ballot papers were spoiled or invalid in the 2008 local and municipal elections.¹⁰

Only **39%** of registered voters turned out for the 2008 elections, although **76%** turned out for the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007.¹⁰



CHAPTER FOUR

SEXUAL REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

How do young people see the problem?

Young people realise that the high rate of teenage pregnancies can, and does, lead to both young men and women leaving school earlier, thereby limiting their employment and livelihoods opportunities. On average, young women tend to have their first pregnancy around 15 years old while young men become fathers at about 17. Some young people are also aware that teenage pregnancy rate is higher in urban areas than rural areas.

What do they understand the causes to be?

Young people believe one of the main factors behind the high rate of teenage pregnancy is the lack of state education on the subject. Population Family Life Education was incorporated into the school curriculum and included information on teenage pregnancy but it has now been discontinued.

Young people also cite poverty as a leading cause. For example, in some cases, girls who lost their parents during the war are unable to support themselves so form relationships with ocada riders on whom they become financially dependent, resulting in pregnancy. In the North, young people say that parents may even encourage their daughters to make sexual advances towards older, wealthier men in order to solve financial problems.

There is also a lack of access to free contraception, which means young people are unable to practice safe sex. Condoms can cost up to 15,000 leones and there is also a consultation fee to gain access to medical centres so many young people are priced out of preventative measures.

What do they think can be done?

Young people say that NGOs are too focused on HIV/AIDS education and have lost sight of the growing problem of teenage pregnancy so need to shift their priorities. They also want to see a mass sensitisation campaign by NGOs and/or the Government, empowering and educating young people to take responsibility for their actions. Making contraception free and reintroducing state education on SRH would also help improve the situation they believe.



“We are dealing with cases where parents have married off their daughters because the family has financial problems.”
Andrew Kondoh, Country Director of Advocacy for Youth in Crises.

“School principals sometimes drive pregnant girls out, while some stop going due to school due to shame and fear of marginalisation.”
Young woman in Waterloo.

“Some girls will try to get pregnant to gain ownership of their boy lovers”.
Young woman in Batkanu.

“Young girls often seek backstreet abortions performed by untrained traditional women who demand a sum dependent on the stage of the pregnancy.”
Young woman in Bo.

At a glance...

65% of young people aged 12-20 are sexually active. ¹¹

The mean age for first sex is **14** years old. ¹¹

68% of girls have their first pregnancy between the ages of 12-20. ¹¹

In a recent survey by UNICEF, **13%** of teenage mothers had never been to school and **55%** had dropped out of school and not returned since becoming pregnant. ¹¹

There are an estimated **34,000** unsafe abortions in Sierra Leone each year. ¹²

Unsafe abortions account for about **8%** of maternal deaths, the majority of which are endured by teenage girls and young women. ¹²

HIV/AIDS

How do young people see the problem?

The young people surveyed believe themselves to be generally well-informed about HIV, AIDS and other STIs. They say they get their information from many sources, including radio, school and organisations like Restless Development, Marie Stopes and the National AIDS Secretariat. However, Restless Development's own research suggests that only 45% of young people can demonstrate a good knowledge of HIV transmission prior to an intervention and a mere 11% can identify three commonly held myths on HIV.⁸ This is backed up by the Government of Sierra Leone's statistics which indicate that only 18% of young women and 30% of young men have a 'comprehensive' understanding of HIV transmission and prevention.¹³

While patterns of knowledge may vary, sexual behaviour among young people is the most risky of all age groups. Young people are generally aware that themselves and their peers are more likely to engage in high risk sexual behaviour than other age groups.

What do they see the causes to be?

While information about the impact of HIV/AIDS and the dangers of risky sexual behaviour may be quite widely available, it appears to have a variable influence on young people's behaviour. Some of the reasons put forward by young people to explain this are the strongly held views such as that sex is more pleasurable without a condom, and the persistence of misconceptions such as that condoms come off during intercourse and can be left inside or that using a condom prevents women from having children in later life.

Many young people do not take advantage of free HIV testing because they fear the consequences of discovering a positive HIV status. They also express doubts about the confidentiality of testing and they fear the stigmatisation and discrimination that goes with a positive status.

What do they think can be done?

Young people think that young people with HIV and AIDS (and other STIs) should talk openly about their experiences to help change attitudes and behaviours rather than simply raising awareness. Most of the young people surveyed said they felt that the messages are stronger when they are delivered by young people to young people.

“Many young women do not think condoms work, and may even be dangerous”.
Anna Macaulay, Clinical Services Manager, Marie Stopes International

“Young women with HIV and AIDS are automatically assumed to be prostitutes, so are distanced from the community.”
Young man in Bo

“Messages about HIV and AIDS prevention are most effective if they come from young people who talk directly to their peers.”
Young woman in Waterloo

“NGOs focus too much on HIV and AIDS awareness programmes, ignoring other STIs and other important health issues.”
Young woman in Makeni

At a glance...

26.6% of women and **43.6%** of men aged 15-24 have engaged in high risk sexual intercourse in the last 12 months with a non-marital, non-cohabiting partner. ¹³

The estimated adult HIV prevalence rate for those aged 15-49 is **1.6%** (2009). ²

1.4% of women and **0.5%** of men age 15-24 are HIV positive. ¹³

Sexually active young people aged 15-19 are among the least likely to use a condom (**15.5%** of women, **26.6%** of men). ¹³



CHAPTER FIVE

CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES

ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

How do young people see the problem?

Young people say that drinking alcohol is part of the culture among young people and generally they consider it to be more damaging to health than taking drugs. Marijuana is seen as especially benign. Most young people (especially young men) drink and use drugs and other substances more than their elders. Puyo (palm wine) is the most popular alcoholic drink and jamba (marijuana) is by far the most common drug. Drug use is higher in urban areas. Both alcohol and drugs make young people more likely to be violent and commit crime.

What do they see the causes to be?

Young people say that they mainly drink and use drugs out of frustration and stress over their limited employment prospects and to forget their problems. However others drink simply for pleasure at social gatherings. They say alcohol like palm wine gets the conversation going. In the case of marijuana, young people claim they smoke it because it offers a number of benefits such as helping them to meditate and making them wise. They also believe it gives them confidence. In some cases, it is also believed to have medicinal effects such as curing asthma.

What do they think can be done?

Young people consider drinking and drug abuse a serious problem and are pessimistic about solving the problem. They say that it may help to cut production or massively increase the price, making them inaccessible to young people.

They say religion also has a key role to play and that religious leaders should actively discourage alcohol and drug abuse. Peer advice may also help to convince some to give up.

Ultimately, young people say that the only thing that could dissuade large numbers of young people from abusing alcohol and drugs is better employment opportunities. Although the National Drugs Control Agency and Youth Crime Watch Sierra Leone are spreading awareness, young people say that sensitisation alone will never work.



“Young people believe marijuana has only positive effects so they start smoking it as young as 15 years old.”
Alex Amara, Affiliate Director, Ignitus Worldwide (Youth Crime Watch Sierra Leone)

“There is a link between substance abuse and political violence among young people.”
Young man, Fourah Bay College, Freetown

“Drug use is more likely to lead to mental health problems than alcohol.”
Young person in Kroo Bay

“The detrimental effects of drinking and taking drugs are well known, but not enough to deter young people.”
Young man in Makeni

At a glance...

72% of Sierra Leoneans have never tasted alcohol.¹⁴

Those with tertiary level education are **4** times more likely to consume alcohol than those with lower levels or no education.¹⁴

40% of current users of alcohol have said their drinking has had a bad effect on their finances.¹⁴

One in five current users of alcohol say their drinking has had a bad effect on their physical health, their social life and/or their marriage or personal relationships.¹⁴

6% of people admit to having tried marijuana once.¹⁴

YOUNG PEOPLE AND DISABILITY

How do young people see the problem?

Young people understand that youth with disabilities face difficulties when travelling to school and university because of stigmatisation and competition for vehicles. They acknowledge that at all levels of education there is a lack of teaching materials for young people with visual, audio and speech impairments. Schools are also not inclusive for those with mobility difficulties. Young people with disabilities also have particularly limited employment prospects, and are perceived to be a burden in the work place.

What do they see the causes to be?

The young people consulted acknowledge that there are very few specialist resources or support for young people with disabilities. In schools, teachers do not receive any training on how to support disabled learners. For example, Albert Sandy, the acting headmaster at the National School for the Blind says teachers have no idea how to include visually impaired students because the Higher Teaching Certificate provides no training.

There are also no suitable materials. For example, at Fourah Bay College in Freetown the library has no Braille materials and while other students are reliant on computers for their studies, there is no specialist “JAWS” software that enables visually impaired students to do the same. In many schools and universities, there is insufficient seating for young people anyway, so for those with physical disabilities, the situation is particularly challenging.

What do they think can be done?

Young people believe that making schools and universities inclusive will require major adjustments. They need to be made accessible for those with physical disabilities by installing ramps and modifying seating as well as providing suitable toilet facilities.

In terms of transportation challenges, the “Young Voices” advocacy group at Leonard Cheshire Disability say that the driver’s union should spread the message that people with disabilities have equal rights. There also needs to be a shift in perceptions about what young people with disabilities are capable of. Sensitisation campaigns within the public and private sectors are particularly important if employment prospects for young people with disabilities are to improve.

“No one offers sympathy for my situation. People even push me out of moving vehicles. By foot, the 1 ½ mile journey takes me three hours.”
Young man with physical disability in Waterloo

“I am totally dependent on other students to find out what the teacher writes on the blackboard. I have to provide financial incentives for my fellow students to dictate notes for me.”
Young man with visual impairment in Freetown

“Disability is not inability.”
“Young Voices” group member, Freetown

“Students need to feel that they belong in schools. Inclusive education allows them to remain in their communities and integrate better into society. Their presence in mainstream schools may also help change negative perceptions about people with disabilities.”
Professor Osman Bah, Regional Manager at Leonard Cheshire Disability

At a glance

The prevalence of disability in Sierra Leone is **2.4%** (2004).¹⁵

According to the WHO there are **490,000** (about 10% of population) living with disabilities in Sierra Leone.¹⁶

Disabled people in Sierra Leone are **2.7** times likely than those without an impairment to experience rape, physical abuse or bullying.¹⁶

16.4% of disabled people have no access to healthcare compared to **7.1%** of non-disabled people.¹⁶



CONCLUSIONS

While this research project was modest in scale, it incorporated the views of a wide spectrum of young people spanning the 15-35 year age bracket, both rural and urban dwellers, and a continuum of educational levels and occupational groups from across the country.

Several important lessons can be drawn from the research. Firstly, the research revealed that young people have a good understanding of the key issues faced not only by themselves but also by the wider youth population in Sierra Leone. Far from being isolated and cut off from realities outside their own narrow experience, these young people demonstrated themselves to be well attuned to the wider problems facing young people generally in this country.

Secondly the research revealed that young people have a strong grasp of the underlying causes of the issues that effect them, and are able to devise original and innovative ideas for potential solutions. It proved that young people are the best source of knowledge about the situation of youth in this country and are also informed and creative when it comes to strategies needed to tackle the challenges.

The implications of these findings are that consulting with and incorporating the insights of young people in to policy making processes can bring valuable and important insights that will enhance the quality of policy formulation and decision-making on youth-related issues. Young people know young people best and engaging youth in research and policy development is essential if young people's needs are to be properly identified and effectively dealt with.

In conclusion, the authors of this report strongly recommend that decision-makers avoid employing tokenistic approaches to engage youth in policy processes, but rather take measures to meaningful harness their valuable insights gained from a unique vantage point.

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Restless Development Sierra Leone is a youth-led development agency established in 2005 at the invitation of the Ministry of Youth, Education and Sport. Restless Development's vision is a world where young people are empowered to lead change and development both in their own communities and in society more generally.

This report brings together the views of over 200 young men and women regarding the key issues facing them in Sierra Leone today, supplemented by the opinions of civil society and government stakeholders working with and for youth. The ten focus issues spanning education, livelihoods, civic participation, sexual and reproductive health, alcohol and drug use and disability were identified by the young people themselves as the most pressing and urgent concerns faced personally and by youth more generally. For each issue, young people reveal what they see the key issues to be, what they understand to be the causes of the problem and what they believe can be done to tackle them.

The result is a fascinating and revealing snapshot of the state of the youth in Sierra Leone today as seen through the eyes of young people themselves.



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