

Transformative Role of Youth-Led Movements in Peacebuilding: Innovations and Challenges in Sierra Leone



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ABSTRACT

In Sierra Leone, youth-led social movements have been essential to post-conflict peacebuilding by tackling the aftereffects of the violence, including social disintegration, political marginalisation, and unemployment. With an emphasis on their contributions to sustainable peace and development, this research explored these movements' innovations and difficulties. The study investigated how youth-led projects use creative tools like social media, the arts, and entrepreneurship to promote communication and reconciliation through content analysis of qualitative data from reports, government documents, and case studies. The findings showed that these movements play a key role in fostering grassroots involvement in government and mending societal divisions. However, issues such as restricted financial resources, deeply ingrained social mores, and a lack of political participation still exist. The study concludes that maintaining peacebuilding initiatives requires empowering the young through focused policies, mentorship programs, and financial assistance. Sierra Leone's youth-driven movements underscore the transformative potential of engaging young people in reimagining governance and fostering long-term stability across Africa. To provide young peacebuilders with mentorship, technical assistance, and capacity-building, the study recommends boosting targeted funding for grassroots youth-led peacebuilding initiatives, institutionalising youth participation in national governance and peacebuilding frameworks through advisory councils and inclusion in decision-making bodies, and fortifying partnerships between the government, non-governmental organisations, and international organisations. This study advances scholarship by highlighting the gender dynamics and structural barriers that influence their effects and these movements' transformative role in promoting political stability, reconciliation, and community development.

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Publication History

Received:

23rd March, 2025

Accepted:

11th July, 2025

Published:

22nd August, 2025

To Cite this Article:

Chigudu, Daniel.

"Transformative Role of Youth-Led Movements in Peacebuilding: Innovations and Challenges in Sierra Leone," *E-Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences* 6, no. 9 (2025): 1944 - 1959, <https://doi.org/10.38159/ehass.20256914>.

Keywords: *Youth-led social movements, Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, Post-conflict innovations, Grassroots governance and reconciliation.*

INTRODUCTION

The long-lasting effects of Sierra Leone's eleven-year civil war (1991–2002), which decimated its social, political, and economic institutions, have changed the country's post-conflict environment. After playing a significant role in the conflict as combatants, young people are now essential contributors to peacebuilding initiatives. An important turning point was the 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, which established structures for the involvement of young people and acknowledged their role in post-war

reconstruction. ong-term stability is threatened by youth unemployment, marginalization, and exclusion from government, which continue despite these efforts.¹ Social movements headed by young people have been crucial in tackling these issues. These movements encourage reconciliation, advance discourse, and improve governance outcomes using creative strategies, including advocacy through participatory videos, entrepreneurship, and artistic expression.² However, obstacles like few resources and deeply ingrained social norms still limit their influence. This paper, therefore, examines the creative tactics used by youth-led peacebuilding projects in Sierra Leone, appraises their difficulties, and analyzes their effects on society. This study highlights the transformative potential of empowering adolescents as agents of sustainable peace and development through content analysis of qualitative data from reports and case studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework examines how youth-led social movements contribute to peacebuilding in Sierra Leone by combining the theories of structural violence, social movement, and youth empowerment. These theories offer a prism to view the socioeconomic obstacles, dynamics of collective action, and processes of empowerment that influence young people's involvement in peacebuilding after a conflict.

Structural Violence Theory

Johan Galtung developed the Structural Violence Theory, which emphasizes systemic injustices ingrained in social systems that sustain exclusion and injury without resorting to overt physical violence. Political exclusion, low educational possibilities, and high rates of youth unemployment characterize structural violence in Sierra Leone.³ These structural impediments fuel cycles of poverty and annoyance, which can intensify into confrontations or sustain social unrest. This theory's application in Sierra Leone shows how resolving systemic injustices, like granting access to political representation, work opportunities, and education, can lessen youth vulnerabilities and promote lasting peace. To empower underprivileged youth, for example, programs such as Youth Arise for Rural Development and Empowerment encourage their active involvement in peacebuilding and development processes.⁴

Social Movement Theory

According to McAdam et al., social movement theory describes how political opportunity structures, framing processes, and resource mobilisation all contribute to the emergence and maintenance of collective action.⁵ Resource mobilization is demonstrated in Sierra Leone by youth-led organizations like MOCKY (Movement for Children and Youth), which use funds, networks, and expertise to resolve conflicts and advance peace.⁶ Structures of political opportunity are essential to comprehending the difficulties Sierra Leonean youth groups face. Young people's restricted political space frequently compels them to take up grassroots projects or informal advocacy techniques. For instance, the Ministry of Youth and Sport's "Youth Radio" creation gives young people a forum to express their concerns and

¹ Christine Cubitt, "Political Youth: Finding Alternatives to Violence in Sierra Leone," Accord Monograph Series, February 2012, <https://www.accord.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Monograph-Feb-2012-Political-youth-Finding-alternatives-to-violence-in-Sierra-Leone.pdf> (https://www.accord.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Monograph-Feb-2012-Political-youth-Finding-alternatives-to-v-;RosalindHanson-Alp,%20%27YouthandSecurity.%27ConciliationResourcesReport,%20December2007,%20https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/YouthandSecurity_200806_ENG.pdf).

² ReliefWeb, "African Youth Engaging in Peace and Security," June 2024; UNOY Peacebuilders, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change," UNOY Research Report, November 2023, <https://www.gppac.net/news/report-beyond-dividing-lines-reality-youth-led-peacebuilding-afghanistan-colombia-libya-sierra>.

³ Christina Mammone, "Youth, Empowerment and Long-Term Peace Consolidation: The Case of Sierra Leone," *Social Alternatives* 42, no. 1 (2023): 15–21; Ibrahim Bangura, "We Can't Eat Peace: Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods and the Peacebuilding Process in Sierra Leone," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 11, no. 2 (2016): 37–50.

⁴ YARDEPB, "Youth Arise for Rural Development Empowerment & Peace Building," 2011, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/youth-arise-for-rural-development-empowerment-and-peace-building-yardepb/>.

⁵ Doug McAdam, J McCarthy, and M Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶ Institute of Security Studies (ISS), "Children and Youth in Sierra Leone's Peace-Building Processes," Institute of Security Studies, 2003, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/22702/Children_youth_sierraLeone2.pdf.

impact decision-making.⁷ Youth movements' positioning as change drivers rather than stability risks is a clear example of framing processes. Youth groups can win over a broader segment of society by portraying unemployment as a national security concern or highlighting their involvement in reconciliation efforts.⁸

Youth Empowerment Theory

Application of Theoretical Framework

Zimmerman argues that youth empowerment theory strongly emphasizes giving young people the tools, opportunity, and self-assurance they need to take charge of their lives and contribute significantly to society.⁹ This theory identifies three aspects of empowerment: behavioral (taking action), interactional (understanding social systems), and intrapersonal (self-efficacy).

By empowering young people to spearhead community projects that tackle local issues, initiatives such as YOSUPA (Youth for Sustainable Development) in Sierra Leone emphasize behavioral empowerment.¹⁰ Initiatives that teach young people about government structures and give them advocacy skills are examples of interactional empowerment. For example, the "Youth Council" proposed by the Ministry of Youth aims to foster dialogue between young people and political authorities.¹¹

Structural Violence Theory Application

The idea is put into practice by tackling structural obstacles that prevent young people from participating in peacebuilding. For instance:

- Employment Initiatives: As part of more significant state-building initiatives, programs under the UN Peacebuilding Architecture concentrate on giving jobless young people jobs.¹²
- Education Access: To end poverty cycles that sustain structural violence, efforts are being made to increase literacy rates among marginalized youth.¹³

Social Movement Theory Application

This idea describes how young people band together despite structural obstacles:

- Resource Mobilization: MOCKY effectively mediates conflicts at the local level by leveraging networks.¹⁴
- Framing Processes: Support for youth-focused job programs has been mobilized by framing unemployment as a danger to stability.¹⁵

Youth Empowerment Theory Application

Empowerment initiatives convert abstract concepts into practical results:

- Behavioral Empowerment: After a conflict, YOSUPA empowers young people to spearhead initiatives for peace.¹⁶
- Interactional Empowerment: By encouraging communication between youth and authority, "Youth Radio" gives them more clout when influencing policy decisions.¹⁷

⁷ Temilade Ayo Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone" (UiT Norges arktiske universitet, 2016).

⁸ Ibrahim Bangura, "Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods and the Peacebuilding Process in Sierra Leone," Transition International, 2016, <https://www.transitioninternational.com/ti/we-cant-eat-peace-youth-sustainable-livelihoods-and-the-peacebuilding-process-in-s>.

⁹ Marc A. Zimmerman, "Psychological Empowerment: Issues and Illustrations," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23, no. 5 (October 1995): 581–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506983>.

¹⁰ Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

¹¹ Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

¹² Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

¹³ Mammone, "Youth, Empowerment and Long-Term Peace Consolidation: The Case of Sierra Leone."

¹⁴ Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

¹⁵ Bangura, "We Can't Eat Peace: Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods and the Peacebuilding Process in Sierra Leone."

¹⁶ Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

¹⁷ Aladeokin, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. Youth Participation in Sierra Leone."

METHODOLOGY

The primary research technique used in this study to investigate youth-led social movements and peacebuilding initiatives in Sierra Leone is content analysis. Researchers can find patterns, themes, and concepts in various communication formats using content analysis, a methodical approach to textual data analysis.¹⁸ This approach is especially well-suited for this study because it allows for qualitative analysis of pertinent papers, reports, and media content about youth initiatives in Sierra Leone's post-conflict setting. The information used in this study came from several sources, such as publications and scholarly journals that addressed youth, peacebuilding, and the post-conflict growth of Sierra Leone; media articles and social media posts addressing youth-led projects in Sierra Leone; government documents and policy papers about youth involvement and peacebuilding; and reports from international organizations like the UN and NGOs operating in the country. A coding methodology was created using the concepts of directed content analysis, considering Sierra Leone's unique circumstances and current theories of adolescent involvement in peacebuilding. Types of youth-led projects, obstacles faced by young peacebuilders, the effect of youth movements on political stability, and new developments in peacebuilding techniques were among the first categories. As part of the coding procedure, pertinent sections were assigned to these predetermined categories after thoroughly reading the gathered materials. More codes were developed as new themes surfaced during the study to capture these ideas. To gain a deeper grasp of the complexity of adolescent engagement in peacebuilding, qualitative analysis concentrated on deciphering the context and subtleties within the coded segments. Examining creative tactics used by youth movements and their effects on nearby communities was made possible thanks in large part to this method.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Sierra Leone's Civil War (1991–2002) and Its Aftermath

A tragic conflict characterized by tremendous bloodshed, the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002) was stoked by rivalry for diamond resources and frustrations over decades of corrupt governance. To topple President Joseph Momoh's administration, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), under the leadership of Foday Sankoh and backed by Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, started the war.¹⁹ Mass amputations, sexual assault, and the enlistment of child soldiers were among the horrors that occurred throughout the conflict, which also resulted in nearly 50,000 deaths and 2.5 million displaced people.²⁰ The conflict was prolonged by the financing of government forces and rebel factions by diamonds extracted through forced labor.²¹ The 1999 Lomé Peace Agreement, which included protections for the rights of youth and children, and the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program, which disarmed more than 70,000 fighters, were two examples of post-war reconstruction initiatives.²² However, economic and infrastructure recovery was slow, and many towns were left without essential services.²³

The Role of Youth During the Conflict and in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Young people had a crucial role in the violence as both offenders and victims. Pro-government militias and groups such as the RUF enlisted about 11,000 youngsters against their will, frequently using drugs to make them less sensitive to violence.²⁴ Youth-led groups like Youth for Sustainable Development (YOSUPA) and the Movement for Children and Youth (MOCKY) became important peacemakers in

¹⁸ B. L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001).

¹⁹ EBSCO-Research-Starters, "Sierra Leone Civil War 1991–2001," 2021; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Volume Two, Chapter Two," Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 2004, <http://www.sierraleonetr.com/index.php/view-report-text-vol-2/item/volume-two-chapter-two>.

²⁰ EBSCO-Research-Starters, "Sierra Leone Civil War 1991–2001."

²¹ Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Volume Two, Chapter Two."

²² UNOY, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change," UNOY Peacebuilders, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://unoy.org/youth-in-sierra-leone/>; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Volume Two, Chapter Two."

²³ EBSCO-Research-Starters, "Sierra Leone Civil War 1991–2001."

²⁴ Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Volume Two, Chapter Two"; The Politic, "Killing Children: Reflections on Sierra Leone's Civil War," The Politic, 2019, <https://thepolitic.org/killing-children-reflections-on-sierra-leones-civil-war/>.

local conflicts after the war.²⁵ Political elites persisted in marginalizing young people despite these initiatives, utilizing them as electoral pawns.²⁶

Youth Unemployment, Marginalization, and Their Implications for Peacebuilding

With almost 60% of young people in Sierra Leone (ages 15 to 35) unemployed or underemployed and illiteracy rates around 50%, the country's youth experience systematic marginalization.²⁷ Economic marginalization reflects pre-war circumstances, making them more susceptible to political manipulation. Unemployed teenagers are frequently recruited into violence as "security squads" for politicians during election seasons.²⁸ "If you do not have money, you abandon school and take any job, including stealing," bemoaned a young man from Bo District.²⁹

The Potential of Sierra Leone's Youth as Agents of Change

More than half of Sierra Leone's population is young and becoming more active in peacebuilding. Young people are empowered to spearhead climate action and education initiatives through programs like Plan International's innovation funds and the World Food Forum's Youth Chapter.³⁰ Programs centered around football, such as "Local Youth Groups Unite for Peace," promote unity across communities.³¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2250 further legitimises youth involvement in peace processes. "Young people are pushing for change—they want their voices heard," according to one advocate.³²

Socio-Economic, Political, and Cultural Factors Motivating Youth Participation in Peacebuilding

In Sierra Leone, youth-led movements are significantly influenced by socioeconomic, political, and cultural variables. With 70% of young people either unemployed or underemployed and 50% illiterate and unskilled, the socioeconomic landscape is characterized by widespread unemployment and underemployment. Due to these circumstances, young people become frustrated and vulnerable, which leaves them open to manipulation by political elites during elections or other political events.³³ Due to cultural norms, young people are frequently left out of decision-making processes, which furthers their marginalization. Nonetheless, the post-conflict landscape has changed, with programs like "Youth Radio" giving young people a voice and influencing policy.³⁴ Politically, young people have been inspired to start movements calling for inclusion and systemic change due to the lack of representation and meaningful participation in governance.³⁵

²⁵ Institute of Security Studies (ISS), "Children and Youth in Sierra Leone's Peace-Building Processes"; UNOY, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change."

²⁶ Transition International, "We Can't Eat Peace: Youth Sustainable Livelihoods," Transition International, 2016, <https://www.transitioninternational.com/ti/we-cant-eat-peace-youth-sustainable-livelihoods-and-the-peacebuilding-process-in-sierra-leone/>; Africa-Is-a-Country, "And What for Future Generations in Sierra Leone?," 2018, <https://africasacountry.com/2018/03/and-what-for-future-generations-in-sierra-leone>.

²⁷ UN-Peacebuilding-Fund, "Supporting the Government of Sierra Leone," UN Peacebuilding Fund, 2011, <https://www.unpbf.org/countries/sierra-leone/>; Restless-Development, "The State of the Youth: Sierra Leone," Restless Development, 2020, <https://restlessdevelopment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/State-of-the-Youth-Sierra-Leone.pdf>.

²⁸ Bangura, "Youth, Sustainable Livelihoods and the Peacebuilding Process in Sierra Leone"; Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), "Volume Two, Chapter Two."

²⁹ Restless-Development, "The State of the Youth: Sierra Leone."

³⁰ Plan-International, "Youth Innovation Funds - Sierra Leone," Plan International, 2024, <https://plan-international.org/sierra-leone/what-we-do/lead-young-people-driving-change/youth-innovation-funds-2/>; World Food Forum (WFF), "WFF Sierra Leone Youth Chapter: Cultivating Change for Youth Leadership in Food Security and Climate Action," World Food Forum (WFF), 2025, <https://youth.world-food-forum.org/news/detail/wff-sierra-leone-youth-chapter--cultivating-change-for-youth-leader>.

³¹ Vatican Dicastery, "Promoting Peace Through Youth and Sport in Sierra Leone," Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, 2023, <https://www.humandevlopment.va/en/progetti/promoting-peace-through-youth-and-sport-in-sierra-leone.html>.

³² UNOY, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change."

³³ Cubitt, "Political Youth: Finding Alternatives to Violence in Sierra Leone."

³⁴ Institute of Security Studies (ISS), "Children and Youth in Sierra Leone's Peace-Building Processes."

³⁵ Mammone, "Youth, Empowerment and Long-Term Peace Consolidation: The Case of Sierra Leone."

Role of Post-Conflict Trauma and Unemployment in Shaping Youth-Led Initiatives

The youth of Sierra Leone have been significantly impacted by post-conflict trauma. Socioeconomic disenfranchisement exacerbated psychological pain for many young warriors during the war.³⁶ This trauma is made worse by unemployment, which breeds resentment and despair. Research indicates that youth unemployment raises the likelihood of poverty and social exclusion and can result in mental health problems like depression and acute stress.³⁷ Youth in Sierra Leone have shown tenacity in the face of these obstacles, leading efforts to combat unemployment and promote peace. For instance, the Ikon Initiative for Sustainable Development empowers young people through education, inclusiveness, and sustainable development initiatives that provide them the tools they need to be self-sufficient.³⁸ Football is also used in sports-based initiatives such as "Local Youth Groups Unite for Peace" to foster interethnic harmony.³⁹ (

Examples of Key Movements or Organisations

Several youth-led groups have become essential contributors to Sierra Leone's peacebuilding initiatives:

- SAVE-SL, or Students Against Violence Everywhere in Sierra Leone, was established to prevent violence through community service and education initiatives. Through practical service projects like graffiti clearance and advocacy campaigns, SAVE-SL engages students in conflict resolution training and encourages nonviolence.⁴⁰
- The Children's Forum Network, or CFN, has spearheaded voter education initiatives in Sierra Leone that support peaceful elections. To guarantee that children are not taken advantage of during election-related activities, they develop children's manifestos and propose them to political parties.⁴¹
- The ability of young people as mediators in peacebuilding processes has been demonstrated by MOCKY (Movement for Children and Youth). This grassroots group has arbitrated conflicts in communities affected by violence.⁴²
- Ikon Initiative for Sustainable Development aims to empower young people through education and sustainable development initiatives that encourage independence and intercultural communication to settle disputes amicably.⁴³
- Local Youth Groups Come Together for Peace: This program, which the UN Peacebuilding Fund funds, uses athletic events like football games to foster interethnic cooperation and peacebuilding among communities.⁴⁴

These movements demonstrate the transformative power of youth-led projects in tackling structural issues and promoting lasting peace and reconciliation.

Innovative Approaches to Peacebuilding

Use of Social Media: Leveraging Platforms to Counter Hate Speech and Promote Reconciliation

Young people in Sierra Leone increasingly use social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp to promote peace and fight hate speech. These platforms offer readily available resources for spreading messages of peace, organising communities, and fostering intercultural communication. For instance, young people have used social media to advocate for nonviolence and ask for calm during politically

³⁶ Mammone, "Youth, Empowerment and Long-Term Peace Consolidation: The Case of Sierra Leone."

³⁷ Santigie Abu Kamara, "Has the Level of Security Threat among Unemployed Youth in Sierra Leone on the Increase? What Do You Think Should Be Done to Unlock Job Opportunities for Unemployed Youth?," *Disiplinlerarası Afrika Çalışmaları* 1, no. 2 (2023): 129–40.

³⁸ UNAOC, "Ikon Initiative for Sustainable Development Profile," UNAOC Community Engagement Winner Project Description, 2023, <https://www.unaoc.org/ysf-winner/community-engagement-for-peace-and-conflict-resolution-sierra-leone/>.

³⁹ Vatican Dicastery, "Promoting Peace Through Youth and Sport in Sierra Leone."

⁴⁰ SAVE-SL, "Students Against Violence Everywhere Sierra Leone," 1989, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/SAVE-SL/>.

⁴¹ Global Fund for Children, "Children and Youth Contribute to Peaceful Elections in Sierra Leone," Global Fund for Children Blog Post, December 11, 2024, <https://globalfundforchildren.org/story/children-and-youth-contribute-to-peaceful-elections-in-sierra-leone/>.

⁴² Institute of Security Studies (ISS), "Children and Youth in Sierra Leone's Peace-Building Processes."

⁴³ UNAOC, "Ikon Initiative for Sustainable Development Profile."

⁴⁴ Vatican Dicastery, "Promoting Peace Through Youth and Sport in Sierra Leone."

tense times like elections. In a nation with strong political tensions, this has significantly impacted averting conflict.⁴⁵ Depolarising narratives and fostering togetherness are common goals of social media campaigns. Young activists, for example, have used the viral nature of these platforms to spread their ideas by creating hashtags that call for peace during elections or local conflicts. Youth-led organisations also hold webinars and online seminars to inform communities about the perils of hate speech and the significance of reconciliation.⁴⁶

Examples of Viral Campaigns

Election Peace Campaigns: During the 2023 elections, young people who had received training from Catholic Relief Services utilised WhatsApp groups to report real-time disruptions and documented instances of violence at polling places. Their work promoted accountability and openness, which helped to ensure peaceful elections.⁴⁷ **Initiatives to Combat Hate Speech:** Youth-led organisations have started internet campaigns with images and films that combat hate speech and encourage tolerance. Young users frequently take notice of these efforts and actively spread the word about them across their networks.⁴⁸

Community-Based Initiatives Fostering Social Cohesion

An essential component of Sierra Leone's peacebuilding initiatives is grassroots advocacy. Programs like peace clubs, intergenerational discussions, and cultural activities promote social cohesiveness by overcoming differences between community groups. These initiatives frequently emphasise local ownership, guaranteeing that interventions are customised to meet the unique requirements of communities.⁴⁹ Intergenerational conversations bring young people and seniors together to talk about challenges impacting their communities, promoting respect and understanding. Cultural events such as storytelling sessions and traditional music performances also aid reconciliation by honouring the shared history and promoting interethnic cooperation.⁵⁰

Case Studies Highlighting Successful Interventions

Fambul Tok: This group works to foster peace in rural areas impacted by the civil conflict by holding storytelling sessions around bonfires and performing ceremonial cleansings. Fambul Tok has effectively promoted forgiveness and restored trust among neighbours who were previously enemies by establishing its work on traditional methods.⁵¹

Initiatives for Community Development (ICOD): ICOD has created Peace Committees to mediate local disputes after educating community members on alternative dispute resolution techniques. Their civic education activities have reached more than 15,000 people through community theatre, radio presentations, and roadshows.⁵²

Youth Peace Discussion: This program, which is run by the Children and Youth for Peace Agency-Sierra Leone (CYPA-SL), organizes discourse sessions with security forces, civil society actors, and young members of political parties to encourage nonviolence during elections. Through outreach

⁴⁵ A. K. B. Dixon, "Africa's Youth – An Underutilized Resource in Peacebuilding," *Development Dialogue*, 2023, https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/DHF_DD63_p103-107.pdf.

⁴⁶ UNOY, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change."

⁴⁷ Catholic Relief Services (CRS), "Youth Promote Peaceful Elections in Sierra Leone," Catholic Relief Services, 2023, <https://www.crs.org/stories/youth-promote-peaceful-elections-sierra-leone>.

⁴⁸ UNOY, "Youth in Sierra Leone Are Leading Change."

⁴⁹ Fambul-Tok, "All in the Fambul: Local/Global Approaches to Peacebuilding," Fambul Tok International, 2013, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/files/case-study-competition/20130322-All-in-the-Fambul.pdf>.

⁵⁰ LEK-U-CULTURE, "Celebrating Sierra Leonean Culture," LEK U CULTURE, 2025, <https://lekuculture.com/donations/celebrating-sierra-leonean-culture-lek-u-cultures-cultural-shows-and-events/>.

⁵¹ Fambul-Tok, "All in the Fambul: Local/Global Approaches to Peacebuilding."

⁵² ICOD-SL, "Empowering Communities Through Peacebuilding," Initiatives for Community Development – Sierra Leone (ICOD-SL), 2007, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/initiatives-for-community-development-sierra-leone/>.

initiatives, the program has raised thousands of people's awareness of the importance of peaceful election conduct.⁵³

These grassroots initiatives address the particular difficulties Sierra Leonean communities experience while highlighting the need for local involvement in promoting lasting peace.

Challenges Faced by Youth Peacebuilders

Limited Access to Funding

Significant funding limitations prevent Sierra Leonean youth peacebuilders from carrying out long-term projects. Compared to other sectors, government budget allocations for youth initiatives remain among the lowest, indicating a lack of prioritization.⁵⁴ For instance, the Ministry of Youth Affairs got minimal financing between 2012 and 2016, limiting its ability to assist youth-led peacebuilding initiatives.⁵⁵ Furthermore, foreign funders frequently allocate funds to more prominent groups, which leaves grassroots youth movements with little money and a limited capacity to expand their operations.⁵⁶

Exclusion from Formal Decision-Making Processes

In Sierra Leone, youth are frequently excluded from political and governance processes because of deeply ingrained gerontocratic traditions. Even though young people make up most of the population, they are marginalized in decision-making processes dominated by older generations. This exclusion is especially noticeable in rural areas, where traditional chieftaincy structures limit youth voices.⁵⁷ Youth's influence on policy results is limited since their opinions are usually discounted or tokenized even when involved in consultations.⁵⁸

Patriarchal Governance Structures

Young people, especially women, are increasingly excluded from leadership positions due to patriarchal standards. Male-dominated political structures and cultural norms hamper gender equality in peacebuilding. As seen by the experiences of female leaders backed by the 50/50 Women's Group, for example, female candidates frequently encounter animosity, a lack of party support, and even threats during elections.⁵⁹ These obstacles deter young women from seeking leadership positions in peacebuilding movements.

Gender-Specific Challenges Faced by Young Women

The following particular obstacles prevent young women in Sierra Leone from fully participating in peacebuilding:

- **Cultural and Social Norms:** Women are not suited for leadership roles due to deeply ingrained patriarchal views. Men and women who doubt their skills or moral character frequently oppose female candidates.⁶⁰
- **Lack of Resources:** According to World Vision 2025, women are disproportionately impacted by poverty and have less access to the networks, capital, and training needed for effective leadership.

⁵³ Children and Youth for Peace Agency – Sierra Leone (CYPA-SL), “Youth Peace Dialogue,” CYPA-SL, 2018, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/children-and-youth-peace-agency-sierra-leone-cypa-sl/>.

⁵⁴ Edward Kallon, “The Case of Post-War Sierra Leone,” ASC-TUFS Working Papers, Volume 1, 2021, http://www.tufts.ac.jp/asc/ASC-TUFS_WP_01_065-093kallon_web.pdf.

⁵⁵ Government of Sierra Leone, “Annual Budget Reports,” *Ministry of Finance Archives*, 2016.

⁵⁶ Restless-Development, “The State of the Youth: Sierra Leone.”

⁵⁷ Multi-Partner-Trust-Fund, “PBF Project Document,” Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, February 2019, https://mptf.undp.org/sites/default/files/documents/40000/prodoc_gtw_210219.pdf.

⁵⁸ Restless-Development, “The State of the Youth: Sierra Leone.”

⁵⁹ Oxfam-GB, “Breaking the Barriers: Women’s Leadership & Participation,” Oxfam GB Programme Insights Report, February 2008, <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/120600/1/pi-breaking-barriers-sierra-leonean-women-070208-en.pdf>.

⁶⁰ Oxfam-GB, “Breaking the Barriers: Women’s Leadership & Participation.”

- **Threats and Intimidation:** During elections or community events, female leaders are regularly subjected to harassment and threats from their male counterparts. Young women are deterred from assuming leadership positions by this unfriendly environment.⁶¹

Notwithstanding these obstacles, programs like the Women's Forum for Human Rights and Democracy have offered young women advocacy and public speaking training. Some have been able to actively engage in peacebuilding processes and get above cultural obstacles thanks to these efforts.⁶²

Societal Perceptions of Youth

In Sierra Leone, youth are frequently portrayed as "troublemakers" or "victims," diminishing their capacity to effect change.

Those who cause trouble: Because of their past participation in armed groups during the civil war, many people believe that young people are impetuous and violent. Even though many young people actively participate in peacebuilding projects, this view still exists.⁶³

Victims: According to some, young people are helpless victims of structural flaws like poverty and unemployment. Although structural factors are acknowledged in this narrative, young agencies tackling these issues through grassroots activism are sometimes overlooked.⁶⁴

These beliefs restrict opportunities for young participation in official peacebuilding procedures. Nonetheless, initiatives like Fambul Tok have shown that young people may successfully spearhead efforts at community-level reconciliation if provided with the necessary tools and platform.⁶⁵ Fostering youth engagement in national development programs requires a shift in cultural narratives to acknowledge them as peacebuilders.

Societal Impact of Youth-Led Movements

Contributions to Political Stability

(a) Voter Education Campaigns

By encouraging voter education and nonviolent election participation, youth-led projects have made a substantial contribution to political stability in Sierra Leone. For instance, more than 75,000 youth were inspired to vote in the general elections of 2023 by Yiaga Africa's #ThePowerOf18 campaign. Targeting first-time voters and encouraging civic involvement, this program prepared young leaders to serve as voter educators and advocates for peaceful elections.⁶⁶ Similarly, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) used young volunteers to monitor polling places and report violent situations, guaranteeing openness and lowering tensions throughout the election process.⁶⁷

(b) Conflict Resolution Initiatives

Additionally, youth movements have been essential in reducing local tensions. Through peer-to-peer learning programs and conflict resolution training, the Search for Common Ground (SFCG) initiative gave young people the tools to manage conflicts in their communities. For example, Okada drivers, who operate motorbike taxis and are frequently involved in traffic disputes, were instructed to defuse tensions with law enforcement and other stakeholders by organizing into groups. By strengthening

⁶¹ Oxfam-GB, "Breaking the Barriers: Women's Leadership & Participation."

⁶² World Vision International, "Women as Agents for Sustainable Peace Before & After Elections," World Vision International, 2025, <https://www.wvi.org/stories/sierra-leone/women-agents-sustainable-peace-during-and-after-elections>.

⁶³ Youth Policy, "'Youth': Victim, Troublemaker or Peacebuilder?," 2011, https://www.youthpolicy.org/uploads/documents/2011_Youth_Conflict_Policies_Victim_Troublemaker_Eng.pdf; Restless-Development, "The State of the Youth: Sierra Leone."

⁶⁴ Youth Policy, "'Youth': Victim, Troublemaker or Peacebuilder?."

⁶⁵ Fambul-Tok, "All in the Fambul: Local/Global Approaches to Peacebuilding."

⁶⁶ Yiaga-Africa, "Yiaga Africa Targets 75,000 Youth with Voter Education in Sierra Leone," Yiaga Africa, 2023, <https://yiaga.org/yiaga-africa-targets-75000-youth-with-voter-education-in-sierra-leone/>.

⁶⁷ Catholic Relief Services (CRS), "Youth Promote Peaceful Elections in Sierra Leone."

linkages between youth organizations and local government, these initiatives helped to stabilize society as a whole.⁶⁸

Role in Promoting Reconciliation

(a) Community-Based Reconciliation Efforts

Youth-led initiatives have greatly aided reconciliation amongst the civil war-affected communities. Groups like Fambul Tok use traditional customs like storytelling and bonfire rites to unite victims and offenders of violence, facilitating communication and forgiveness. According to Fambul Tok, youth are essential in planning these gatherings, overcoming generational gaps, and building participant trust.⁶⁹

(b) Sports as a Tool for Unity

Initiatives for peacebuilding centered on sports have also proven successful in fostering reconciliation. For instance, the Local Youth Groups Unite for Peace initiative brought together young people from all ethnic and social backgrounds through football games. This project, which the UN Peacebuilding Fund supported, highlighted the value of group activity for peace by showcasing how everyday endeavors promote cooperation and solidarity across boundaries.⁷⁰

Long-Term Impact on Governance Reforms and Community Development

(a) Governance Reforms

Through elevating the voices of young people in decision-making processes, youth-led advocacy has impacted governance improvements. Creating local and national youth commissions has given young people a forum to interact with decision-makers on political inclusion, education, and jobs. To ensure that youth perspectives were incorporated into policy frameworks, SFCG facilitated the Youth Commission, which allowed Okada drivers and other workers in the informal sector to participate in national employment strategy debates.⁷¹

(b) Community Development

Through grassroots efforts, youth movements have also fueled communal development. To promote environmental sanitation, rebuild flooding-damaged infrastructure, and support women's rights in leadership positions, the Youth Alliance for Community Development-SL (YAFCOD-SL) organized young people. These initiatives enhanced living circumstances and gave young people the confidence to participate actively in the development of their communities.⁷² Community resilience has been further increased by initiatives like the UNDP's Youth-Led Innovation Challenge, which has helped young inventors create long-term solutions to environmental problems.

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

Socio-Economic Drivers of Youth-Led Movements

The findings show that youth-led movements in Sierra Leone are significantly influenced by socioeconomic issues, especially poverty and unemployment. Young people have become frustrated and feel excluded due to the high youth unemployment rate, which has inspired them to band together and push for structural change. Initiatives organized by young people have become popular for tackling these issues; many concentrate on fostering entrepreneurship, generating jobs, and supporting educational change. The inability to participate in official decision-making procedures has fueled youth movements even more. There is a rise in grassroots lobbying to elevate the voices of young people since they feel marginalized in governing systems controlled by older generations. In addition to tackling

⁶⁸ Search for Common Ground (SFCG), "Youth-Led Conflict Mitigation: The SFCG Sierra Leone Guidance Note," Search for Common Ground (SFCG), 2022, https://cnxus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/0304_Sierra20Leone.pdf.

⁶⁹ Fambul-Tok, "All in the Fambul: Local/Global Approaches to Peacebuilding."

⁷⁰ UNPBF, "Promoting Peace Through Youth and Sport in Sierra Leone," UN Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF), October 17, 2023, <https://www.humandevlopment.va/en/progetti/promoting-peace-through-youth-and-sport-in-sierra-leone.html>.

⁷¹ Search for Common Ground (SFCG), "Youth-Led Conflict Mitigation: The SFCG Sierra Leone Guidance Note."

⁷² YAFCOD, "Empowering Communities Through Peacebuilding," Youth Alliance for Community Development-SL (YAFCOD-SL), 2014, <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/organisations/youth-alliance-community-development-sl-yafcod-sl/>.

current socioeconomic issues, these groups are fighting the systemic injustices that support marginalization.

Innovative Approaches to Peacebuilding

Innovative ways of peacebuilding, utilizing both technology and conventional methods, have been embraced by youth-led movements. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have proven crucial to combat hate speech and advance healing. Viral campaigns that support peaceful elections and dispute resolution have effectively energized communities and promoted intercultural communication. Community-based programs such as intergenerational discussions, peace groups, and cultural events have successfully promoted social cohesion at the local level. These initiatives are impactful and culturally appropriate because they prioritize local ownership and follow customs. Football games and other sports-based events have also been utilized as unifying forces, uniting young people from various backgrounds to work together toward common objectives.

Challenges Faced by Youth Peacebuilders

Despite their efforts, young people who work as peacebuilders encounter many obstacles. A significant obstacle is still limited financing availability since many youth-led organizations find it challenging to obtain the funds required to continue their operations. Their exclusion from official governance systems curtails their capacity to influence higher-level policy. Gender-specific obstacles are especially noticeable for young women in leadership positions within peacebuilding groups. Patriarchal standards and cultural views frequently undermine their efforts, and involvement is discouraged by harassment and intimidation. Furthermore, youth's acceptability as valid participants in peacebuilding processes is still hampered by societal views of them as "troublemakers" or "victims" rather than change agents.

Societal Impact of Youth-Led Movements

Through voter education campaigns and efforts to resolve conflicts, youth-led movements have substantially contributed to political stability. These initiatives have eased tensions and increased confidence in democratic processes by encouraging public participation and openness during elections. Additionally, their attempts to resolve conflicts have lessened local conflicts, which has improved social stability overall. Regarding reconciliation, youth-led projects have been essential in mending the rifts between civil war-affected communities. Programs based on customs or shared interests, such as sports, have encouraged tolerance and cooperation between many communities. Additionally, by promoting young participation in decision-making procedures and promoting community development through grassroots initiatives, these movements have had a lasting effect on governance reforms.

The Role of Youth as Agents of Change

The findings highlight how young people may be change agents in Sierra Leone's peacebuilding environment. Young people have shown resiliency and creativity in tackling societal issues despite structural obstacles like unemployment and political isolation. Their versatility and resourcefulness are demonstrated by their capacity to organize groups using conventional methods and contemporary resources like social media. However, the backing of stakeholders, including local communities, international organizations, and governmental institutions, is crucial to the success of youth-led campaigns. The viability of these efforts is still in doubt if they do not receive sufficient funding or are not included in governance mechanisms. More funding is required for youth empowerment initiatives that give young people the tools and venues they need to lead transformative change successfully.

Gender Dynamics in Peacebuilding

The results show that gender dynamics significantly impact how well youth-led peacebuilding initiatives work. However, young men predominate in many leadership positions among these groups, and patriarchal norms and societal expectations present difficulties for young women. Targeted interventions that empower young women through mentorship programs, leadership development, and harassment protection are necessary to address these inequities. Challenging societal perceptions of

women as weak leaders or supporting actors in peacebuilding initiatives is also critical. Sierra Leone can utilize the full potential of its youth to create lasting peace by encouraging gender parity in youth-led activities.

Shifting Perceptions of Youth

How society views young people continues to be a significant obstacle to their full involvement in peacebuilding initiatives. The narrative that presents youth as "victims" or "troublemakers" erodes their credibility as agents of social change. Presenting success stories of youth-led projects that benefit communities is necessary to change this perspective. Furthermore, by showcasing their leadership and decision-making abilities, incorporating young people into official government structures can influence public opinion. This change would improve peacebuilding initiatives' efficacy and support long-term social change.

Sustainability of Youth-Led Movements

Although youth-led movements have had significant success in the post-conflict environment of Sierra Leone, systemic obstacles and a lack of funding continue to raise questions about their viability. A multi-stakeholder strategy that combines donor funding, international organizations' capacity-building initiatives, and governmental policy changes is needed to ensure the sustainability of these projects. The influence and scope of these movements can also be increased by encouraging collaborations between youth-led groups and more established establishments. Stakeholders can foster an atmosphere that empowers youth to continue enacting good change by tackling systemic issues, including political marginalization and budget shortages. Youth-led initiatives in Sierra Leone have shown great promise in resolving socioeconomic issues, advancing political stability, and encouraging reconciliation. However, to fully realize their influence, structural barriers must be removed through focused resource investments, inclusion programs, and gender equity measures. By doing this, Sierra Leone can unleash the transformative potential of its youth, who are essential contributors to the establishment of enduring peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Relevance of UNSCR 2250 to Sierra Leone

A significant step toward acknowledging youth as vital players in security and peacebuilding was taken with the introduction of UNSCR 2250 in Sierra Leone. Participation, Protection, Prevention, Partnership, and Disengagement and Reintegration are the five main pillars that the resolution highlights, and they are all highly relevant to Sierra Leone's post-conflict issues. UNSCR 2250 has offered a framework for tackling structural obstacles, such as a lack of access to resources and exclusion from governance structures, by advocating for inclusive youth representation in decision-making processes. Initiatives such as the Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Youth Peace and Security, which encourages stakeholder collaboration to guarantee that youth-led activities are incorporated into national peacebuilding policies, have been sparked by the resolution in Sierra Leone. Additionally, initiatives like the Youth-Led Innovation Challenge, which gives young people the tools to create solutions specific to local problems, have been sparked by the resolution's emphasis on financial and technical support. These initiatives show how global frameworks can have a revolutionary effect when successfully localized within the sociopolitical environment of Sierra Leone.

Recommendations for Scaling Up Youth-Led Innovations

i. Increased Funding for Grassroots Initiatives

In Sierra Leone, youth-led peacebuilding projects frequently encounter financial limitations that restrict their capacity to grow and endure. The government, foreign donors, and private sector players should set up specific financing sources for grassroots youth organizations to solve this. Projects that tackle regional issues, including unemployment, environmental damage, and tensions between communities, should be given priority when allocating this money. Programs like the UNDP's Youth-Led Innovation Challenge, for instance, show how focused funding can enable young people to create creative solutions

that meet the needs of their communities. Youth organizations' access to efficient financing can also be improved by streamlining grant application procedures and offering capacity-building assistance for financial management.

ii. Institutionalizing Youth Participation in National Peacebuilding Frameworks

It is crucial to institutionalize youth engagement at all levels to guarantee their meaningful inclusion in governance and peacebuilding processes through:

- Creating permanent youth advisory groups within government ministries to offer feedback on policies impacting youth is one way to accomplish this.
- Enforcing the inclusion of young people in national commissions on peace and reconciliation and district councils, among other decision-making organizations.
- Coordinating youth-led initiatives across districts and guaranteeing alignment with national priorities, organizations such as the National Youth Action Group on Youth Peace and Security should be strengthened.

Youth agency is increased, and confidence between youth and government institutions is increased when youth engagement is institutionalized.

iii. Strengthening Partnerships Between Government Agencies, NGOs, and International Organizations

To scale up youth-led initiatives in Sierra Leone, stakeholders must work together. NGOs and international organizations could collaborate with government agencies to offer youth initiatives logistical support, mentorship opportunities, and technical expertise. For example: International organizations can facilitate knowledge-sharing by linking Sierra Leonean youth movements with international networks promoting best practices in peacebuilding.

- NGOs can provide training programs on leadership, advocacy, and conflict resolution to give young people the skills they need for successful peacebuilding.
- Through entrepreneurship programs or skills development efforts connected to market demands, public-private partnerships can be used to generate job possibilities for youth.

These collaborations increase the effectiveness of youth-led initiatives and promote a cooperative ecology where resources are effectively distributed.

CONCLUSION

The study has emphasized how vital youth-led social movements are to Sierra Leone's attempts at peacebuilding. These movements have become vibrant forces in response to systemic issues, including post-conflict trauma, political marginalization, and unemployment. Through social media and grassroots advocacy tools, youth have shown incredible ingenuity and tenacity in fostering community growth, political stability, and reconciliation. Through voter education efforts and conflict resolution programs, their contributions have strengthened democratic processes and reduced local disagreements. The analysis emphasizes how youth-led social movements can bring about lasting peace. Through fostering unity among civil war-affected communities and promoting structural reform, youth have established themselves as catalysts for advancement in Sierra Leone's post-conflict recuperation. Their inventiveness and resourcefulness in tackling complex societal issues are demonstrated by their capacity to integrate contemporary technologies with customary methods.

However, more funding for youth empowerment is necessary to realize youth-led movements fully. To fully realize the potential of Sierra Leone's youth, institutional obstacles like a lack of finance, exclusion from decision-making procedures, and gender-specific difficulties must be addressed. Youth-led initiatives' capacity will increase, and targeted investments in education, job opportunities, and leadership development will facilitate long-term stability and growth. Sierra Leone's youth are essential to the country's efforts to achieve resilience and lasting peace. In a country still healing from war wounds, acknowledging their agency and investing in their empowerment is the right thing to do and a sensible strategy to guarantee long-term stability. Sierra Leone can harness the transformative power of

its youth to create a more peaceful and prosperous future by assisting youth-led movements and incorporating their voices into governing systems.

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