

Developing Skills For The New Economy

Vocational Training in Post War Sierra Leone

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In this ever-changing fast paced world, technology becomes more and more important. Each of us will be using some sort of technology, everyday of our lives, even is it means in a field as important today as Vocational Training.

Current research into how and why we learn as individuals, how groups and organizations learn and the complex ways knowledge is created, shared, communicated, and culturally mediated in contemporary society addresses fundamental issues for educators and policy makers. We need to enhance the breadth and depth of research on education in the context of the new economy. It is vital that we achieve a deeper understanding of new technology as both an opportunity and a challenge for learning and the delivery of education. Today more than ever, we expect educational institutions to fulfil major economic and social goals to educate citizens, to respond to the needs of a knowledge-intensive, technology-based labour market, and to prepare individuals for learning and acquiring new skills throughout their lifetimes. We need research to understand how our schools, educators and educational systems should respond to these needs to assess our existing learning systems and how they might evolve. Let me therefore shed light on the extent at which vocational training has evolved and how it persists in my country.

Sierra Leone has suffered nearly 10 years of war, which has displaced a large proportion of the population and has destroyed most of the country's infrastructure. Terrible atrocities have been committed against the civilian population by the rebel army and even children have suffered acts of frightening brutality such as limb amputations. Disabled young people face particular hardships as their chances of employment are severely reduced particularly in the case of those who have had

upper limb amputations. For many the only option is to beg for food and money. 1.

Friends of Africa are researching a project to set up a special computer-training laboratory for disabled young people. The courses will initially teach the students the basic programs before moving on to packages for Desk Top Publishing, Computer Aided Design, Book Keeping and other vocational subjects. The second phase will help these people into jobs using the skills and special equipment available through the centre. The centre itself will also employ several of disabled young people on it's own income generating activities. Information Technology offers disabled people in Sierra Leone a new opportunity to lead productive and fulfilled lives.

Initial basic computer training for 50 students will cost \$8,000 over the next twelve months. 2.

The circumstances through which the educational systems in Sierra Leone have evolved in recent years is as a result of the skirmishes and decade long war. There is now an ever-growing response to skills training in both technologies enhancing learning and non-technological usage, in formal and non-formal education. The proliferation of skills and vocational training that so much thrives today is certainly as a result of the countrywide realization that in order for there to be a sustained manpower base, the country must lean towards investing in a knowledge-based economy. Partly too, and perhaps the most persisting idea is the belief that the plethora of young people affected by war direly need these skills to make amends for years lost in the war. It is a bold attempt to catch up with their counterparts in other countries and the rest of the world with these skills that enables them to survive in today's competitive world of globalisation.

The rebel war in Sierra Leone displaced blacksmiths and farmers resulting to the loss of vital assets such as blacksmith tools and farm tools. With the signing of the peace accord, these blacksmiths and farmers will return to their places with no tools to resume agricultural production. Even where donor assistance is likely in terms of farm tools supply; this gesture may not be enough for all the affected population and more so such tools will need frequent repairs. To resettle such a deprived population, blacksmithery will serve as the main basis.

It is estimated that there are 3,000 displaced blacksmiths in the affected areas, Southern, eastern provinces and Tonkolili district in the North. To resettle these blacksmiths they will need basic working tools such as hammer, locally made anvils and blowers; plus assistance in setting up their workshop and a refresher training of seven days.

For more than a decade the SLWOP of the Ministry of Agriculture has been involved in training blacksmiths in the country. The majority of the trainees were sent by the interested organisations such as development projects and NGOs. The programme has the capacity to train 20 blacksmiths per session plus accommodations and food at the Rolako centre (Bombali District - Northern Province). Using local material and know how the programme has forged blowers and anvils which are gaining favour among many village blacksmiths.

Blacksmiths will be selected from chiefdoms and trained to become trainers of other blacksmiths in their respective area of intervention. The trained blacksmiths will be provided with the necessary equipment and assisted to develop tool production centres in the chiefdom. Resource people for this training will be drawn from the private sector as well as from the SLWOP. Training materials such as blacksmith tools and steel will be bought. The training will involve shaping, tempering techniques, cold and forge work, basic workshop management techniques, introduction to improved tools, group formation, sources of scrap and marketing skills and sensitisation to emergency relief for tools. The blacksmiths will be made aware of the rationale and strategy behind setting up chiefdom blacksmith tool production centres as the centres for training and production of basic tools for the resettling population.

Each training session will last for seven days. The project should cater for fare, accommodation, and training materials, and also for the provision of tool packages to each trainee.

About 400 blacksmiths will be trained and equipped (they will be able to train an estimated 2,600 blacksmiths in need of resettlement), 400 tool production and training centres will be established, and four million units of assorted tools adapted to the very specific needs of the farmers in the targeted areas will be produced (each production centre will produce on the average 10,000 units per year. 3

In an article 'Sierra Leone camps try to rehabilitate child victims and soldiers', Margaret A. Novicki writes: 4

"Currently the Nehemiah Project accommodates 140 children, but there are thousands of children throughout the country who need rehabilitation. We expect to replicate the Nehemiah Project throughout Sierra Leone, as finance and resources are released and, as the locally recruited staff gain skills and knowledge in this field, that they will train others to staff the additional units."

The Nehemiah Project seeks to integrate general education and vocational training within a structure designed to encourage responsible, socially adjusted behaviour, whilst addressing the underlying problems of grief, fear, guilt and depression.

Children impacted by war will be eligible for admission to the vocational training program in carpentry, tailoring, weaving, soap making and welding. These children will be referred to CAUSE by several agencies including Children Affected by War (CAW), the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health (MOH), and UNICEF. Training will consist of a six-week internship at vocational training facilities in Waterloo, Bo and Makeni.

In the article 'Sierra Leone camps try to rehabilitate child victims and soldiers', Margaret A. Novicki, of Freetown explains the deplorable circumstances through which amputees live and evolve in acquiring skills.

Maimouna lives with her aunt at the Murraytown Amputee Camp, a squalid shantytown on the outskirts of Freetown, home to over 1,000 amputees, war-wounded and other victims of Sierra Leone's civil war. The camp is managed by Médecins sans Frontiers with the help of Cause Canada and Handicap International. It provides social work services, vocational training, physical therapy, psychosocial counselling and prosthetic aids.

Daniel, age 15, now lives at St. Michael's Lodge, an interim childcare centre 14 miles from Freetown. A former RUF fighter, he and the other 150 children at St. Michael's are learning vocational skills and receiving psychosocial counselling. Most of the children seem quite small for their ages: years of malnourishment have stunted their growth. When asked what he plans for his future, Daniel says he simply wants to go to school. Even these war-hardened youth are still children at heart. It is estimated that the project for one training session of 20 blacksmiths will cost US\$ 3,000, and hopefully, 20 sessions will be organised during the year.

Margaret A. Novicki is United Nations Information Centre Director for Ghana and Sierra Leone.

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This project endeavours to promote an atmosphere in Sierra Leone conducive to sustainable peace. Children impacted by war need to receive psychosocial counselling so they can adapt to peacetime society. Vocational training will help to ensure that they become contributing members of their communities.

Amputees require counselling in order to peacefully come to terms with their disabilities. Occupational therapy will help foster in these victims a new hope for the future. This type of rehabilitation will help them to once again become contributing community members, and this will hopefully lay a foundation helping them to forgive their former adversaries.

Sierra Leone's civil war, and the events following the coup of May 25, 1997, brought unprecedented social and economic disaster to the country. UNDP (United Nations Development Program) estimates that 3.2 million people were directly affected by the war and the aftermath of the May coup. UNDP further states that about 700,000 people sought refuge in Guinea and Liberia. An estimated 12,000

people, the majority of these children, have lost their lives to this conflict (WFP, 1996).

UNICEF believes that as a result of the war, more than 1000 people have had limbs forcibly amputated. About 80% of these have lost either one or both hands. It is also estimated that approximately 2,500 people have endured either severe machete lacerations or permanently debilitating gunshot wounds. Additionally, about 5000 children between the ages of 7 and 14 years were enlisted into military groups to serve either as combatants, child labourers or sex slaves.

The children impacted by war include those recently orphaned, former child soldiers, and children who have been either physically or psychologically handicapped by this conflict. This project offers psychological counselling and vocational training for children impacted by war. These children will participate in the manufacturing of appropriate physiotherapy aids and farm tools. They will also take part in activities specifically designed to assist recent amputees.

Handicap International and Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) plan to provide prostheses to war amputees. Both of these groups, as well as government health authorities, have asked CAUSE to provide occupational therapy and counselling services to complement their work. CC has been asked to provide Canadian occupational therapists and counsellors with an expertise in post-traumatic stress. These professionals will be engaged on a short-term basis to upgrade the training of national health practitioners and to assist in the rehabilitation of both war amputees and children affected by war.

Throughout the project, the issue of the repatriation of children impacted by war and the reintegration of amputees will be addressed both in the vocational programs and in the communities where repatriation will take place. While the acquisition of marketable skills will be key to the repatriation process for children impacted by war, these students will also be instructed on how to meet and overcome common social obstacles they will face upon their return. Amputees will receive similar instruction appropriate to their unique situation.

Communities will also be prepared to receive these victims of war. Through workshops and other types of consultations held with community leaders in the target regions of Greater Freetown/Waterloo, Bo and Makeni, villages will be both practically and psychologically prepared to accept amputees and children impacted by war into their ranks.

In order to assist with the reintegration program, children will be provided with farm tools which can be used as gifts to the community upon their return. The skills they have developed will assist in the economic recovery of their communities and will help smooth the reintegration process as they become contributing members of

their villages.

Amputees will benefit from the program by receiving tools orthopedically designed for their own use as productive members of their community

Further in the case of the sub region, a neighbouring country like Liberia that has also been confronted by years of violence and war, vocational skills training has been a major pre-occupation to improving the lives of the inhabitants. The John Tamba Tailoring Shop in Kakata in Margibi county (Liberia) is a cinderblock building just big enough to squeeze six Singer sewing machines and the people who operate them. At one of the machines, Musu Yoryor is putting the finishing touches on a pair of drawstring trousers she learned how to make at the Don Bosco Centre for war-affected children.

“I am practicing here until I get my own sewing machine,” she said, showing the trousers. “I feel good about it.”

Yoryor, 19, completed the vocational training course at Don Bosco and was graduated in a ceremony last month. She and her 100 classmates are now budding entrepreneurs in the trades of agriculture, masonry, rattan furniture-making, pastry-making and tailoring.

The Kakata centre was established in 1997 as a hostel for boys and girls who were separated from their families during the recent civil war in Liberia, which ended three years ago. Now, as then, the goal is for these children to be reintegrated into their communities.

“These children carry the stigma of being someone different and we are trying to remove that stigma,” said Alfred Tamba, Don Bosco’s project coordinator in Kakata. Don Bosco is an NGO affiliated with the Catholic Church.

Liberia’s civil conflict (1989-1997) took a particularly brutal toll on children. Thousands were abandoned or otherwise separated from their families. Of the nearly 5,000 documented cases to date, more than 3,000 have yet to be reunited with their families. Many of these children live on their own in the streets, as in Kakata.

Throughout Liberia, UNICEF supports 22 centres offering vocational and literacy training and counselling services for war-affected children. Most of the boys participating in the project fought as soldiers in the war and were demobilized with

UNICEF assistance. Many of the girls were abducted and raped and are now mothers, some as young as 13 years old. Since 1997, when the project began, about 6,000 children have participated.

The 10-month course at the Kakata centre covers basic vocational skills and small-business management. Another centre, in Zwedru (Grand Gedeh county), also operated by Don Bosco, offers courses specifically for teenage mothers, including soap-making, pastry-making and tailoring. It houses a small day-care facility.

Graduates receive tools of the trade – Yoryor will have her sewing machine when funding is secured – and a small cash grant. Under the supervision of a small-business adviser, many of them form small cooperatives as a way to minimize start-up costs and maximize capacity.

The business success of these young people hinges on an improvement in economic conditions, a fact that Alfred Tamba fully acknowledges. Liberia's economy is in shambles, poverty is pervasive and unemployment is the norm. Even in the most economically active region of the country, Montserrado County, residents live on less than US\$2 per household per day.

“We hope these young people will produce. We hope their products will be purchased,” said Tamba.

“It all depends on the economic purchasing power of the people who live here.”

Another focus of the need to help war affected youths in the subregion gain vocational training skills can be noted in the work of the United Methodist Church in Liberia. The United Methodist Located in the town of Ganta, GUMS has an enrollment of over 750 students. The North Carolina conference recently built a new classroom block building for grades k-9. Ganta has been selected to become one of the Operation Classroom, (OC) schools to include a major vocational training program. In Sierra Leone, The UMC has made very good moves to improve vocational training for the students, through the operation class room. In the Southern Head district of Bo in Sierra Leone, The Bo Centenary School has been fortunate in that it is one of the few schools to remain open and functioning during most of the war. The annual conference and OC have agreed to put together a major vocational training program at Bo the school's student enrolment varies from 350 to 450 students in grades 7 to 12. The school has continued to function throughout the civil war.

Finally, the new wave of bridging the digital divide that exist in my country has been a major pre-occupation of the international education and Resource Network, iEARN Sierra Leone. We aim at promoting eLearning as an initiative to speed up

the deployment of a high-quality infrastructure at a reasonable cost; to step up training and overall digital literacy. In a quest to do so, we anticipate the opening up of a community access centre where the youths who have participated in www.childsoldier.net will continue to use the necessary technology.

We can also predict that the youth community access centre will long remain the principle information window to the world for the war affected youths and the underprivileged children. Therefore, the participation of more youths in the cyber spaces and the development of access to the new technology, access to internet centres, and off-line resources, join the children in on-line networks and chat capabilities, the education and acquisition of skills will be assets in the battle against the digital gap between developed and developing countries as is the case of Sierra Leone. The transfer of competence from the facilitator to the war affected youths will allow the children to go on-line with the world and provide job-prospects in computer -related fields thereby enhancing sustainable development and social justice for the community and country.

The expansion of an internet tele-centre for the youths to access on a regular basis is a vision that offers effective application in this great adventure of closing the digital gap and permitting every participating youth to be reintegrated not only in a society free from war, but a society free of knowledge. It will make provision for the recruitment of additional young people in Sierra Leone to learn the relevant tele-communications and ICT skills. It will further foster the promotion of peace education amongst secondary and post-secondary schools and inspire the inclusion of peace education in the school curriculum.

Therefore the expansion of an internet tele-centre for the youths to access on a regular basis is a vision that offers effective application in this great adventure of closing the digital gap and permitting every participating youth to be reintegrated not only in a society free from war, but a society free of knowledge. This in itself enhances learning, and it is a catalyst for social change. Whilst we believe that to each generation is granted new tools needed for human achievement and progress for their own times, ours is the new wave of tele-communication technology that links communities together to making a difference. The child soldiers, war affected children and disadvantaged youths/students will also reveal the predicaments they faced as child soldiers, or victims of war to colleagues across the vast cultural divide. Whilst telling their stories their peers will learn from these revealing stories, and they in turn will feel cathartic in the charge of telling their stories. They derive positive and encouraging feedbacks from their colleagues and again feel that they are not alone. Through multi-media art forms, drawings, paintings, cartoons,

creative writing, music and fine arts sent by snail mail or posted through the web by attachments, the children see for themselves the strength of their talents. The projected outcome will be estimated by the extension of the work to be used as a model in four additional countries; Columbia, Palestine, Uganda, Rwanda, and piloted in a realistic setting. It will demonstrate how children of war use technology to better communicate with peers about real issues that touched their very lives, families and communities , and write for an authentic audience.

We believe that the best depositories of investments are the youths of our nations. Throughout history and everywhere, youthful idealism will reawaken society and nudge it forward to new realizations and sensibilities. We believe that these youths are future leaders of tomorrow and although they have faced unprecedented violence, but utilizing ICT skills for vocational training will be a first step towards transforming them to become active and responsible citizens. Enabling them to acquire useful skills in critical thinking, cross cultural awareness and valuable experience working with new technologies, through collaborative educational projects will be promotional for all the youths concerned and will definitely allow them to face the challenges of globalization.⁵

To sustain the technology internet centre, Grants or funds will be utilized to acquire the necessary tools needed for the achievement of the long-range goal of providing the relevant tele-communication kits to equip the youths with the afore-mentioned skills. The funds will be used to sustain the centre even long after the one-year duration of the implementation time line has passed.

Finally, even though there are enormous challenges youths and all those who access the limited technology available today in Sierra Leone do face, there are also great hopes embedded in the use of technology in vocational training in the near future for the progress of a country whose economy has sunken as a result of a decade long war.

Faithfully Submitted,

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