Interrogating traditional youth theory: Youth peacebuilding and engagement in post-conflict Liberia

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Introduction

Young people are rapidly increasing as a percentage of the world's population and in Liberia, youths constitute more than 60% of the population. As a result of its youthful population, the country's already-existing challenges of unemployment, poverty, lack of education and skills, and a history of instability are supposedly likely to be exacerbated. Cognisant that youths can also be an important resource for peace and conflict prevention, this chapter first examines the background to Liberia's conflict and then focuses on government and civil society's efforts towards enhancing young people's contributions in post-conflict initiatives in Liberia.

Building on qualitative field research in Liberia, this chapter connects its primary case study with secondary data and theory, to analyse how Liberia's youth population is engaged in post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding following the end of a 14-year civil war in 2003. Research was characterised by interviews with key actors and stakeholders in the peacebuilding realm, informal interviews with local people and participant observation of everyday activities at a local level. While the resultant analysis is mindful of the limitations faced by the Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf government in engaging youths in the country's peacebuilding process, it is more focused on youth-led initiatives which demonstrate their agency. Disregarding the 'youth bulge thesis', this chapter focuses instead on the several cases where youth energies have been positively

expended in Liberia. The argument is that young people's re-engagement in post-conflict Liberia has been characterised by individual and group agency. Organic initiatives by young people in transforming their reality are central to Liberia's post-conflict reconstruction process. Although youth participation in socio-economic and political processes in Liberia is far from ideal, this chapter asserts that the existing pockets of youth engagement in the country are enough evidence to dilute the 'youth bulge' and 'youth crisis' theses which have tended to vilify youths in West Africa.

Background to the Liberia conflict

Liberia is classified as a post-conflict society, and such a society is generally perceived as undergoing processes of transition from a state of fragile, negative peace to a state of stable, positive peace. On 11 October 2011, the nation of Liberia went to the polls to choose the country's leader – for the second time after the end of a 14-year civil war – and the voting was credited with largely being peacefully conducted. The absence of a clear majority winner led to a run-off election in November 2011, after which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was again voted in as president.

Liberia became known for its internal armed conflict, which killed more than 250 000 people and displaced over one million people. The country experienced two civil wars between 1989 and 2003, both related to ethnic tensions and struggles for political control. The first civil war had a background in a 1980 bloody coup that was led by Master Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, a native Liberian who executed President Tolbert and 13 of his ministers, subsequently leading to the emergence into power of the People's Redemption Council (PRC). Doe immediately suspended the constitution, assuming total power. However, owing to mounting pressure for democratisation, Doe was forced to conduct elections in 1985. Although he won these elections, they were roundly criticised for being fraudulent and characterised by irregularities, violence and intimidation (Clapham, 1989:106).

The Doe regime was characterised by inept governance, a shrinking economy (Osaghae, 1996:76), and rising repression – a status of affairs that ultimately

contributed to heightening perceptions of illegitimacy and increasing frustration in the country. Subsequently, in December 1989, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched an attack through Côte d'Ivoire against Doe's government forces. Taylor and the NPFL unseated the Doe regime, and took over most of rural Liberia. Ultimately, the NPFL established control by setting up its own government – the National Patriotic Reconstruction Assembly Government (NPRAG). Following the execution of Doe by a splinter group of the NPFL, Taylor assumed total control of Liberia. However, his tenure did not seem to bring stability, as warring factions and dissent groups mushroomed during his reign, prompting a protracted civil conflict in the country. In 1996, the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) was able to interrupt the conflict, which allowed for legitimate presidential elections in 1997. Despite the controversy, these elections saw Taylor victorious as the new president, and the civil war briefly ended (Harris, 1999). However, the new Taylor government was not that different to the Doe regime in its lack of democratic processes and its failure to transform the underlying preconditions for violence. Taylor "did not establish sufficient legitimacy for the state, while the regime's use of state assets and the country's natural resources for personal aggrandisement – at the expense of providing basic security and equitable economic resources distribution – sharply reduced the little legitimacy Taylor had as a result of his popular election" (Saywer, 2008:366). As such, a new set of rebel groups – most notably Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) – emerged. The second civil war, which began in 1999, was an expression of opposition against Taylor's rule. Following regional and international diplomatic efforts, the armed conflict finally ended in August 2003 after the Accra Peace Agreement was signed between the Government of Liberia (GoL), LURD, MODEL and Liberia's 18 political parties. The National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) was established in October 2003. The peace accord led to the creation of a transitional government and the holding of presidential elections in 2005, in which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was elected as Africa's first female president.

Root causes of the Liberian civil war

The civil war that ravaged Liberia between 1989 and 2003 had myriad causes and actors. According to Sawyer (2008:370), the civil war in Liberia "originated in the particular constellation of political power, identity and resources". The roots of the conflict in Liberia stretched far back in Liberian history, which has been marked by a series of conflicts and oppressive regimes. The colony of Liberia was founded by the American Colonisation Society (ACS), which arranged for the settlement of freed American slaves in Africa. The ACS administered Liberia until 1847 when the black settlers issued a declaration of independence, ending Liberia's relationship with the ACS (Olukoju, 2006). Since 1847, the freed slaves, known as Americo-Liberians, formed the True Whig Party and dominated Liberian political life and monopolised socio-economic power for more than 130 years, while indigenous Liberians remained marginalised. The armed conflicts in Liberia were fuelled by structural causes, especially political marginalisation, poverty and macro-economic challenges. In particular, the economic collapse in the 1990s helped to erode human development and economic growth, prompting the emergence of dissent and rebellion. The 'economic causes of conflict' and 'greed and grievance' theses underscore that although the military and political elite did not necessarily share or endorse a political agenda, they were certainly interested in controlling the state and subsequently exploiting opportunities for private wealth accumulation (Reno, 1995, 1998; Collier and Hoeffler, 2003; 2004; Hoffman, 2006). The presence of 'lootable' resources (Collier, 2000) in the form of diamonds, helped rebels not only to fund the war but to find motivation to continue fighting.

Liberia enjoyed strong economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s as a result of massive flows of foreign direct investment (FDI), as well as increased exports of iron ore and rubber (IMF, 2005). The economic challenges of the late 1970s were accompanied by increasing oil prices that resulted in increases in food prices – especially rice, the staple food of Liberians – leading to street protests and riots. These were violently and militarily quelled by the government of President William Tolbert. Consequently, young, marginalised, unemployed and disenchanted Liberians became easy recruits to the conflict's warring factions. In its 2009 report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia

identified the major root causes of the conflict as poverty, greed, corruption, limited access to education, economic inequalities as well as unfair land tenure and distribution (TRC, 2009).

In both civil wars in Liberia, the manipulation of identity politics can be discerned; in this case, ethnicity. Political and military elites used identity to recruit supporters and fighters in their ranks. As Sawyer (2008:360) observes: "Samuel Doe, who belonged to the Krahn minority, ethnicised the various paramilitary groups – establishing essentially a Krahn Presidential Guard – that were implicated in a number of extra-judicial ethnic massacres." In fact, during the first civil war, constantly shifting allegiances as well as the fractionalisation of movements demonstrated that ethnicity was a factor that political elites loved to manipulate to fulfil their goals of personal aggrandisement. Sawyer (2008) asserts that the antagonism between supporters of Doe and those of Taylor later metamorphosed into an ethnic-based conflict between the Mano and Gio, on the one hand, and the Krahn and Mandingo on the other hand. One of the reasons Taylor cited for taking over from Doe was that he was fighting for justice on behalf of the marginalised Gio and Mano ethnic groups. Another explanation for the conflict in Liberia focuses on generational divisions and the marginalisation of youth as a decisive factor. This was perpetuated by a state of "fragility among youth" in Liberia (Bøås and Dunn, 2007; Richards, 2005). Such explanations are akin to the 'greed and grievance' thesis by Collier et al. (2003; 2004; 2005), which emphasises the role of structural inequalities and economic motivations in fuelling conflict. According to Richards (1996:161), the civil war in Liberia was a reflection of the "drama of social exclusion". Richards (2005; 2008) analysed land tenure laws in Liberia and concludes that, since the nineteenth century, land tenure laws have tended to award older men strong control over land, thereby propagating tenure insecurity among the younger population.

Contextualising youth engagement: Contemporary Liberia

Currently, Liberia can be described as a post-conflict country that is undergoing transition. The Government of Liberia (GoL) is working towards building the

capacity of key institutions and addressing human development and economic growth issues. Although violent conflict ended in 2003, post-conflict Liberia remains one of the poorest fragile countries in the world. Approximately two decades of political instability and civil war have significantly eroded Liberia's productive capacity and socio-economic infrastructure. Despite the optimism and some marked achievements since the end of the civil war, peace in Liberia remains fragile. The post-conflict country faces both short-term and long-term challenges of restoring basic services, addressing the issues of poverty and unemployment, strengthening state institutions and rebuilding infrastructure. Additionally, the implementation of pledges made by President Johnson-Sirleaf, particularly those relating to the youth, has been perceived as slow, which makes consolidation of the 'peace dividend' a challenging task. Youth discontent was both the subject and object of Liberia's second post-conflict elections held in October 2011, five years into Johnson-Sirleaf's inaugural government.

Setting the stage: Towards a conceptualisation of youth

The term 'youth' is a fluid and nebulous concept, varying across time, space, cultures and gender, as well as within societies. The concept has continually been redefined by authors from various persuasions including sociology, economics, demography and, recently, peace studies. In extant literature, there are two strands emerging when it comes to defining youth: one strand focuses on outlining biological distinctions between youths and adults, emphasising the age factor and chronological cut-off points, defining 'youth' as a period between puberty and parenthood. The second strand uses cultural markers, defining youth as a distinct social status that is accompanied by specific behaviours, roles, rituals, rites of passage and relationships. This social constructivist definition of youth has been highlighted by scholars studying non-Western societies (Newman, 2005; Sommers, 2001; Heninger and McKenna, 2005). These scholars highlight that 'youth' and 'adulthood' are socially constructed, earned, politicised, ritualised statuses which are not necessarily determined by age. In many traditional African societies, adulthood was reserved for men with relative wealth and social status, while everybody else retained the status of perpetual

minors, no matter how old they were. In contemporary African societies, youth is intrinsically linked with well-defined rites of passage and symbolic steps.

The World Youth Report, released in 2005, embraced this social constructivist perspective when it defined youth as "an important period of physical, mental and social maturation, where young people are actively forming identities and determining acceptable roles for themselves within their community and society as a whole". In essence, youth is often the age where identity is increasingly interrogated, negotiated and refined; it is a complex reality. As a result of the problematique surrounding the construction of youth, Alex de Waal (2002:15) asserts: "The concept of youth is a Western concept and a political construct.… Youth is a problematic, intermediary and ambivalent category, chiefly defined by what it is not: youth are not dependent children, nor are they independent, socially responsible adults."

Despite the complexities in defining this concept, in general, it is agreed that youth is the period that is characterised by the transition from childhood to adulthood, and it is marked by social, cultural and physical changes among the affected individuals. Peace and security scholars Ismail et al. (2009:22) contend that the construct of youth is a social rank that is connected to patterns of entitlement and social status. Curtain (2004) suggests that in most societies, the period of youth is wherein individuals demonstrate the capacity to contribute to the economic welfare of the family. In addition, the concept of youth reflects complex interplay between personal, institutional, political, social and economic processes that young people have to manage within their everyday interactions (UN World Youth Report, 2003:16). The UN General Assembly defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. In its World Development Report (2007), the World Bank expanded the category of youth by defining the minimum age as 12 years, thereby reflecting the Breton Woods Institution's focus on the productive age.

The African Youth Charter (AYC) defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years (AU, 2006). This definition was agreed upon in 2006 during the African Union (AU) Heads of States conference held in Banjul, Gambia, where the AYC was adopted. Similarly, the Economic Community for West African

States (ECOWAS), in its 2008 Youth Policy, reaffirms the definition proposed by the AU. At a national level, many West African countries have adopted definitions of youth that are closely aligned with the AU and ECOWAS definitions, although only a few countries have ratified the AYC. In Liberia, a youth is defined as someone aged between 18 and 35 years (see Table 1 below). This could be explained by the complexity associated with capturing the definition of youth, including the longer time it takes for people to become economically independent on the continent. Ismail, et al (2009:25) add another caveat to this discussion by observing that the political context of most countries in West Africa, especially the violent intrastate conflicts, has hindered the transition of young people into adulthood.

Table 1: Youth definitions in seven West African countries

Country	Definition of youth (in terms of period)
Ghana	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Guinea	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Liberia	15 to 35 years (20-year period)
Mali	15 to 40 years (25-year period)
Niger	14 to 30 years (26-year period)
Nigeria	18 to 35 years (17-year period)
Sierra Leone	15 to 35 years (20-year period)

Source: Ismail et al. (2009:25)

Unpacking theories on youth

A cursory look at studies undertaken on youth reveals an emphasis on youths' sense of vulnerability, exclusion and marginalisation from society. These studies often present youths either as victims or villains. Krishna Kumar (1997:21) refers to some young people as the "voiceless children of war". In extant literature, there seems to be overwhelming conceptualisation that young people are in crisis –

an assumption that denotes youth as the vulnerable section of the population. Ismail et al (2009:25) describe youths in West Africa as being characterised by hardship, political exclusion and disenfranchisement. Perhaps one of the most renowned descriptions of how violence creates victims out of children is Graça Machel's 1996 study, which resulted in the UN General Assembly Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (UN, 1996). A sequel to the Machel report and subsequent review (2001) describes the ruinous effects of war on all children. Despite this landmark report's ability to highlight such sordid effects of war on young people, literature such as that has often resulted in the erosion of any form of agency from youths. Eyber and Ager (2004:189) therefore observe an emphasis on child and youth "vulnerability rather than resilience". Indeed, the recurring theme in youth literature has tended to largely portray youths as passive beings instead of active community members who possess agency to alter their social conditions. Such a narrative is determinist, as it usually portrays young people as a homogenous category that is isolated from the rest of society.

Traditionally, the 'youth bulge theory' has dominated literature about youths. A 'youth bulge' is defined as "extraordinarily large youth cohorts relative to the adult population" (Urdal, 2004:1). In the 1990s, German economist and sociologist Gunnar Heinsohn propounded the 'youth bulge theory', arguing that a large youth population is prelude to instability and civil unrest. Heinsohn (2008) further asserts that a 'youth bulge' occurs when a country hosts between 30% and 40% of young males from ages 15 to 29 years. In his 2008 opinion piece in the New York Times, Heinsohn applies the 'youth bulge theory' to analyse the post-election violence in Kenya. The 'youth bulge theory' was further popularised by American political scientists Fuller and Pitts (1990) and Jack Goldstone (1991), who argue that developing countries whose populations are 'youth-heavy' are therefore especially vulnerable to civil conflict. Proponents of the 'youth bulge theory' highlight that a burgeoning youth population poses a threat to peace, especially if youths are economically and politically marginalised. This thinking also asserts that young people, especially those in the developing world, constitute a vulnerable group with diminished life prospects, facing challenges of limited access to resources, employment and education.

Dominant conceptualisations of the youth perceive young people as being under threat or as a cause of societal crises. These theories highlight the linkage between youth and violence, and often foretell the likelihood of young people participating in various forms of violence including rebellion, warfare, gang violence, criminality and other kinds of aggressive behaviour. For example, the 'youth bulge theory' predicts the likelihood of violent conflict and instability if a society is characterised by a large proportion of unemployed youths. Perhaps the most-known theorist who sees youths as a ticking time bomb is political scientist Robert Kaplan (1994), who predicted youth-led violent initiatives in the contemporary world. Similarly, anthropologist Richards (2005), studying youths in Sierra Leone and Liberia, asserts that youths are likely to engage in violence as a result of the alienation of young people by state institutions, non-state actors and the private sector. Kaplan (1996:16) encapsulated his fear of the youth when he illustriously characterised male youths in urban West Africa as "out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatens to ignite". In apparent concurrence with such virulent portrayal of the youth, political scientist Huntington (1996) argues that 'youth bulges' in Muslim societies have contributed to the radicalisation of the Muslim world. Huntington (1996:259–261) hypothesises that 'youthful' societies are particularly more vulnerable to war. As such, Huntington posits that the demographic factor must be considered when attempting to explain the radicalisation of Islam. He asserts that the people who go out and kill other people are males between the ages of 16 and 30 years. These assertions were confirmed by the Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2002), which voiced its concern of economic stagnation in the context of growing youth populations in the Arab region.

Studies by Madsen et al, led by Population Action International (PAI) (2007) and by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2007) respectively suggest a strong correlation between countries prone to civil conflicts and those with burgeoning youth populations. Against this background, Zakaria (2001), Ujeke (2001) and Wessels (2002, 2006) have reiterated the dangers of a rapidly increasing youth population. Urdal (2004) is convinced that youths are the epitome of the "devil in demographics". Urdal (Ibid.) also adds another dimension – that of governance regime. Citing the

cases of Zambia, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Yemen, Niger, Togo, Iran and Jordan, he further advances the thesis that added to the 'youth bulge,' countries that are more at risk of experiencing armed conflict are those experiencing negative or stagnant economic growth (Urdal, 2004:17). 'Youth bulge' proponents argue that unemployed youths are more susceptible to militarisation and armed violence (Smyth, 2003; Sawyer, 2002; Sawyer, 2008; Rabwoni, 2002; Parsons, 2004; UNICEF, 2005; Urdal, 2006). Sawyer (2002) concurs with the 'youth bulge theory' when he discusses the 'crisis of youth' as an attribute that curtails the attainment of lasting peace in the Mano River region of West Africa. Predictions of the 'youth bulge theory' are compounded by the reality that "while young people constitute a majority of the population in some countries, their majority status is not reflected in the distribution of recognition, access to education/employment or their economic/political position in relation to other groups in society" (UNDP, 2006:75). Expressing similar observations, Zakaria (2001), quoted in Urdal (2004), argues: "Youth bulges combined with small economic and social change provided the fundamentalism of the Islamic resurgence in the Arab world." Collier et al. (2003) reiterate that young unemployed men are prime candidates for recruitment as soldiers and or rebels in any civil war.

Apart from scholars, policymakers have also subscribed to the theories on the 'youth bulge' and 'youth crisis'. The UN 2004 Report by the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change points towards youth as a threat to security. The report identifies youth unemployment as both a cause of violence and a consequence of failed post-conflict peacebuilding, potentially leading to further violence. Similarly, the United Nations, in its 2004 and 2005 proclamations on West Africa and Liberia, respectively, reiterated statements linking youth and conflict, specifically highlighting youth unemployment as a prime condition for, and the cause of, violence. Overall, UN documents are fraught with assumptions that young people – especially those who are unemployed, uneducated, disaffected and marginalised – are a threat to peace and security. An observable theme in these reports suggests that without the generation of employment, young people are susceptible to violent activities and cultures of violence.

Another mainstream theoretical conception of young people is that of the 'youth crisis', which frames youth increasingly as the cause and effect of societal crisis.

A 'youth crisis' is described as a situation where the transition to adulthood is blocked or shrunk due to various socio-economic and political challenges. This situation leads to the failure by youths to attain the requisite status of adulthood (UNDP, 2006). Thus, instead of the concept of youth being characterised by a transition to adulthood, it becomes what is described as an "enduring limbo" (Spinks, 2002:193), which is a source of immense frustration. Proponents of the 'youth crisis theory' emphasise how economic and social crises in many parts of the world are severely affecting young people by impairing their capacity to negotiate their transition into adulthood (UNDP, 2006). To make their case, the 'youth crisis' scholars point to young people in most of the developing world who are increasingly deprived of education and employment opportunities. They argue that uneducated and unemployed individuals lack the possibility of upward social mobility. Using West Africa as a framework for analysis, Kaplan (1994) argues that violent conflict and insecurity are directly connected to the presence of a large, unemployed and disaffected mass of youth. Richards (1996) employs the 'youth crisis' theoretical framework to argue that young people in Sierra Leone joined the rebellion as a way of demonstrating their frustration with exclusionary neo-patrimonial practices of the state. As such, the 'youth crisis' theory has often been used to explain the involvement of young people in violent conflict. Youth violence in Sierra Leone was attributed to the alienation of young people by state-centred development processes, a lack of educational prospects and a dearth of employment opportunities (Richards, 1996). Maclay and Ozerdem (2010) argue that many of Liberia's young people are disconnected from broader society and, in some cases, are being actively marginalised. They further assert that young people in Liberia typically have had little independence or agency over their own lives, and even less influence in the community around them. Analysing youth crime and delinquency in Latin America, Benvenuti (2003) argues that 'youth crisis' is a product of inept societal policies and structures. Benvenuti (2003:7) posits: "Inequality and impoverishment, further reinforced by neo-liberal macroeconomic policies adopted by many countries in the region, together with the incapacity of national states to address poverty and exclusion in the distribution of economic, political and social resources, account for the main reason for the proliferation of juvenile delinquency."

In a similar vituperative vein, youths have been labelled as the "lost generation" (Cruise O'Brien, 1986). Mostly, youths are presented as vehicles or objects of violence. Richards (1995; 1996) explains the increased participation of youths in armed conflicts in West Africa as being a reflection of what he labels the 'crisis of youth'. A similar argument is espoused by Collier and Hoeffler (2002), who assert that often poor and marginalised youths have legitimate grievances against the state, which are often manipulated by political elites to create violent conflict. In Kenya, over 70% of participants in Kenya's 2007/2008 post-election violence were youths (EDC, 2009). An Afrobarometer survey in Kenya (2008) concludes that youth exclusion from political processes represents the greatest push towards youth violence. Other studies have indicated the nexus between youth unemployment and youth engagement in violence and gang involvement (Mercy Corps, 2011). Similarly, in the Niger Delta, the prevalence of youth gangs and militancy is attributed to socio-economic and political marginalisation, especially related to the issue of oil and the resource control crisis (Ukeje, 2001). In Burundi, youth unemployment and poverty are cited as contributing towards insecurity in the post-conflict country, especially the ongoing incidences of banditry (Ngariko and Nkurunziza, 2005). A non-governmental organisation (NGO) operating in Burundi, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), warns that high youth unemployment poses a threat to society, as youths are most often vulnerable to political manipulation. Furthering the same argument, McLean Hilker and Fraser (2009:4) highlight that "where youths feel that existing power structures marginalise them, violence can provide an opportunity to have a voice". Maclay and Ozerdem (2010:345) relay a similar message when they posit that "studies of Liberia's ex-combatant population, and countless personal accounts from the war's belligerents, victims and bystanders, lead us to the common but nevertheless disheartening inference that the war was fought mainly by youth". The vulnerability and propensity of youths to conflict was highlighted in the UN Secretary-General's 2001 Report on the Prevention of Armed Conflict, which observed that young, uneducated people are easy recruits for parties to violent conflict.

The pessimistic conceptualisation of youth among scholars is pertinently illustrated by Abdullah and Muana (1998) and Bangura (1997), who analysed

Sierra Leone youth experiences using the 'lumpen youth' thesis. The authors define a 'lumpen youth culture' as a sense of antisocial and anti-establishment orientation. These authors assert that the 'lumpen youths' are most often "in search of a radical alternative" (Abdullah, 1998:204). In addition, these youths are described as "largely unemployed and unemployable youth, mostly male, who live by their wits [and] have one foot in what is generally referred to as the informal or the underground economy. They are prone to criminal behaviour, petty theft, drugs, drunkenness, and gross indiscipline" (Abdullah 1998:208).

An alternative view on youth: the human agency framework

Most theorising and analyses of youths in post-conflict societies have tended to focus on the challenges they face and the vices they present. These observations are inclined to view young people either as perpetrators of violence, as problems to be solved or as helpless victims of society's structures and processes. While these conceptualisations are evidently informed by realities on the ground, they have diverted attention from the distinctive initiatives of peacebuilding and social change processes in which youths participate. What remains lacking in the current body of literature is a focus on the positive aspects of youth engagement in post-conflict societies. The obsession with youth victimhood and vulnerability, coupled with scant academic attention on the role of youths in peacebuilding processes, leads to unresponsive youth policies and programmes. Accordingly, this chapter embodies an emancipatory social analysis that seeks to view actors as independent agents of social reality, despite the existence of structural constraints and limitations.

Like scholars such as Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007), this paper reflects dissatisfaction with the mainstream perspectives of youths in post-conflict societies, which revolve around 'victimology'. Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007:72) advance: "Focusing only on the vulnerabilities of young people is a limiting perspective that denies them the opportunity to influence their own lives and futures, and overlooks their insights, their rights to participate and their potential to contribute to peacebuilding." Indeed, young people are active individuals, possessing assets such as resilience, curiosity, intellectual agility,

innovativeness, vision of possibility and capacity to help others (Apfel and Simon, 1996:9–11). Scholars such as Boyden and De Berry (2004), Argenti (2002), De Waal (2002), Sommers (2006), and Thorup and Kinkade (2005) now acknowledge the ability of young people to influence their fate positively. Given such possibilities, this chapter focuses on Liberia to demonstrate how young people are increasingly becoming proficient and resilient actors in societies that are constrained by post-conflict realities.

This assessment provides an alternative view of young people, which can be located in the human agency framework. Simply defined, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to think and act independently, make choices and impose those choices upon the world. White and Wyn (1998:317) offer an even simpler definition when they say that "agency is simply goal oriented activity", which "involves attempts to modify, reform or retain aspects of the existing social order". Agency is located within social relations (Anderson, 1980) and is shaped by structural conditions such as age, gender, ethnicity and class. Individuals that possess agency are those with the capacity to shape and work around the larger institutional and historical forces.

In contemporary societies, agency is expressed in various ways, including 'active citizenship', which refers to considerable engagement with key social institutions. White and Wyn (1998:318) articulate the three dimensions of agency – namely "consciousness of the potential to take action, the willingness to take collective action and the knowledge and wiliness to change social structures". The concept of agency demystifies notions of 'victimhood' and helplessness, as it denotes the ability and capability of individuals to rise above the constraints of social structures, rules and situations to become vehicles of change. Human agency is a theory that is subscribed to by both sociologists and psychologists. Within sociology, the debate about the relationship between 'structural determinism' and 'free will' – or between external constraints and consciously chosen action – has become perennial. Sociologist, Giddens (1984) attempts to transcend the structure- agency debate by offering the 'structuration theory' as a premise for the analysis of human behaviour. The 'structuration theory' posits that human behaviour is an outcome of the 'duality of structure', in which human actors exercise strategic choice and agency using institutional resources. Bandura

(1984; 1989), a psychologist, postulates that agency is displayed when individuals exhibit more persistent efforts towards addressing their constraining condition. Agency is not only demonstrable in individuals, but can also denote collective action that is determined to impact on the social structure. As such, organised, collective efforts by groups, associations and communities such as youth groups, which are directed at the institutions in the public domain, can be labelled as 'agentic' behaviour. The human agency framework is useful in explaining how young people, who are directly affected by violent conflict and poverty, can emerge above these conditions to become active peacebuilders. Garcia (2006) observes that youth are a potentially powerful peace constituency.

Youth engagement in post-conflict societies: The experience of Liberia

From the Soweto uprisings in South Africa to the anti-military protests in Nigeria, to the 'Twitter revolution' in Moldova and finally to the 'Arab Spring', history has demonstrated that young people are not innocent bystanders of social change, but that they are innovative, creative and 'agentic' participants in socio-economic and political processes. Youths in many parts of the world have evidently played progressive roles towards transforming situations of conflict, ultimately leading to the reconfiguration of political and social structures. In West Africa – particularly in Nigeria and Mali – youths were part of civil society coalitions that spearheaded political transformation in the 1990s, by resisting military regimes in their respective countries. Similarly, in the 'Arab Spring', youth activism had a positive transnational impact across North Africa and even extended to parts of the Middle East, such as Syria and Bahrain. In these instances, youths demonstrated that they could engage positively by challenging repressive regimes instead of being manipulated as instruments of aggression and violence. Evaluating the conflict transformation role of youths during apartheid South Africa, Drummond-Mundal and Cave (2007:68) conclude that young people's "exercise of agency made a difference". The involvement of youths in the anti-apartheid struggle began with the Soweto uprisings in 1976, and the outcome was a loosening of apartheid laws. Reynolds (1998:45), also observing young people's agency in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, says that

youths chose "to take part in the struggle against apartheid". She stresses that they took "profoundly serious political and moral decisions in relation to their own safety and ambitions, as well as the safety and interests of their families".

The same perspective applies to youths in Liberia. It is agreed that civil war had a colossal effect on Liberia's young people. The cumulative impact of violence and displacement decimated the livelihoods of youth and removed many of them from typical civilian life. Given the role of young people in civil war and its impact on this demographic, it becomes almost natural to cling to despondent conceptual frameworks. However, theories such as the 'youth bulge', 'youth crisis' and 'lumpen youth' are hugely negative in their conceptualisation of youths. They underestimate the youth and fail to highlight their role as positive agents of change and key actors in peacebuilding, both by policy makers and academics. The reality is that not all unemployed youths will become criminals or members of rebel groups, as youth initiatives in Liberia and other countries soundly demonstrate. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2006 report proposes that young people play active roles in social change as civil society actors, political constituents or participants in measures to redress violence. Indeed, there is evidence of youths transcending identities and background, overcoming structural challenges to become leaders in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Young people have declined to use violence despite the limited socio-economic and political spaces accorded to them. With specific reference to Africa, Nicholas Argenti (2002) observes that "the remarkable thing is not why some of Africa's youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have". Youths participating in violence reflect "only microcosms of the heterogeneous and multifaceted universe that, much for the sake of convenience, we call youth" (UNDP, 2006:18).

Increasingly, the UN has begun to acknowledge the worth of youth in the global socio-economic, political and security agenda. The UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) analyses how the UN's interest in youth issues has evolved. The BCPR 2005 Report notes that in 1985, the UN General Assembly called for the observance of the International Youth Year to draw attention to the important role of young people and their potential contribution to development (UNDP, 2005). Similarly, the same report demonstrates the

UN's interest in youth issues by highlighting how the preface to the United Nations Statistical Charts and Indicators on the Situation of Youth (1980–1995) document acknowledged: "Youth, more than ever, are at the forefront of global social, economic and political developments." In 1995, the UN adopted an international strategy, the 'World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond', to address the problems of young people more effectively, and to increase their participation in society. This strategy also provides practical guidelines for national governments and international agencies to improve the situation of youth and strengthen their capacity for effective and constructive participation in society. In the same vein, the UN General Assembly has also realised that young people represent agents, beneficiaries and victims of major societal changes and are generally confronted by a paradox: to seek to be integrated into an existing order or to serve as a force to transform that order" (United Nations, 1995). In addition, through its Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the UN has begun to develop a fully-fledged agenda focusing on youth, by elevating young people to the position of providers of solutions to global challenges. UNDESA acknowledges that young people possess innovation, energy, enthusiasm and exuberance, which makes it imperative to invest massively in programmes that focus on youth development in conflict and post-conflict settings. Other UN agencies also work closely with the youth or mainstream a youth development perspective in their work. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) is specifically youth-focused and believes that if youth energy is channelled creatively, young people can become powerful forces for peace (UNICEF, 2005; 2009). In a positive conceptualisation of youth, Olawale (2004:3) points out that:

> Young people incarnated the future and represented the promises of restored identities, as opposed to colonial alienation and postcolonial forms of domination and subordination. As bearers of the twofold project of modernity and the return to the sources of African cultures, they were called upon to promote and respect the political and moral obligations of citizenship and of political, social and cultural responsibility, with a view to constructing African democracies.

Despite the sordid circumstances surrounding post-conflict Liberia, youths in this African nation can be positively considered as agents of social transformation. Young Liberians are seeking to transform the neo-patrimonial and predatory social structure of their post-conflict state into an example of sustainable peace. Every day, youths in Liberia generate livelihoods and participate in social change processes, on their own volition or with support from state and non-state actors. The initiatives undertaken by these youths challenge the well-engrained portrait of unemployed, idle and disgruntled Liberian youth who are likely to become future recruits for combat. Amidst the 85% unemployment rate in Liberia, youths nonetheless engage in activities geared towards socio-economic advancement, mostly within the informal sector. One popular occupation of an average Liberian youth is what is termed 'hustling'. Literally defined, hustling means "capitalizing on every opportunity to procure a good or a service to supplement income and symbolic capital" (Munive, 2010:331). Hustling, essentially, is a colloquial word in Liberia that is used to describe many types of informal employment which constitute the main source of livelihood for numerous Liberians. Hustling activities include motorbike riding for transportation, vending and other forms of petty trade. Although it is risky and unsafe, motorcycle taxi driving is a thriving business in Liberia that engages many ex-combatants and other war-affected youths. Munive (2010) adds that the very act of hustling – which is characterised by high levels of mobility, intense use of social networks and creativity – demystifies the conception that Liberian youths are static, and always waiting for change to come externally. Such inventiveness demonstrates how youths have developed creative responses to violence, inequality and poverty. Ismail et al (2009:53) characterise these initiatives as evidence of "unsung and unrecognized, domain of structures, actors and self-start activities outside of the state, the family and subsistence activities that young people look to for support, advancement and a sense of belonging". This observation acknowledges that youths are involved in positive social transformative activities, which is a departure from the way youths have been commonly depicted in extant literature. In a similar vein, Diouf (2003:4) posits that, "excluded from the arenas of power, work, education, and leisure, young Africans construct places of socialisation and new sociabilities whose function is to show their difference, either on the margins of society or at its heart, simultaneously as victims and active agents,

and circulating in a geography that escapes the limits of national territories." Despite the risks and limited sustainability associated with hustling, this type of work is entrepreneurial, enhances the livelihoods of youths and often sustains their immediate day-to-day needs, apart from securing young people's places in Liberia's society and economy.

Outside the economic realm, Liberia's youths are increasingly involved in the public domain, including politics. They are slowly galvanising to use their huge population figures as a resource. Studies indicate that 54.6% of the 1.3 million registered voters for the 2005 election were youths, although those who actually voted were less (Jarwolo, 2007:13). Realising this inert power, youths in Liberia launched the Vote Your Future 2011 Campaign in January 2011. This multi-stakeholder campaign was designed to encourage voters under the age of 37 to register to vote in the 2011 general and presidential elections. This campaign included youth groups such as the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), Youth Action International (YAI), the Liberia National Youth Congress (LNYC), Tackling Poverty Together (TPT), the Motorcycle Union and Liberia RISING 2030, among others. Youths mobilising under the auspices of the Vote Your Future 2011 Campaign clearly reflect the realisation that they possess the power to transform Liberia's politics positively. As a category possessing agency or free will, youths are acknowledging that they can reform constraining social structures by participating in the electoral process, thereby changing the governance landscape of Liberia.

Critics contend that the 2005 elections, wherein George Weah's Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) participated as presidential candidate, were seen a new dispensation for young people. In fact, the fact that a young person was contesting was perceived as a vehicle for the upward social mobility of Liberian youth into national politics. Weah's campaign was energetic and it succeeded in mobilising thousands of young people from a state of hopelessness into a popular movement that was geared towards the transformation of Liberian politics. The 2005 elections in Liberia also witnessed the participation of youthful political parties, including the United People's Party (UPP), which was "essentially organized as a party of the dispossessed. Its founding leaders were young populists who mobilized support from the grassroots" (Sawyer,

2008:183). Members of the UPP were largely unemployed and underemployed youths as well as students and workers – its initial cadres were student leaders at the University of Liberia and Cuttington University College. The 2011 elections were similarly characterised by visible evidence of youth participation, especially during the campaign period. In 2011 elections, George Weah campaigned under the auspices of the Campaign for Democratic Change (CDC) and his major item on the election manifesto was the quest for jobs. This theme resonated with young people's concerns; hence the domination by youths in CDC rallies. Participation of youths in Liberian politics – as campaigners, supporters, voters and, to a lesser extent, as candidates – is a clear reflection of the shift of youths from being 'innocent bystanders' to active participants in social change processes.

The engagement of Liberian youths in politics, particularly elections, is not peculiar to this country. A study conducted by Ismail et al (2009) in seven West African countries (Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Liberia, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone) revealed that over 70% of youth respondents expressed belief in voting as a way of influencing public policy through regime change. Despite the restricted political space and limited representations of youths in key decision-making, youths nonetheless expressed hope in their capacity to engender democracy and social change.

Youths in Liberia also demonstrated consciousness of the negative effects of politically motivated violence. A report by International Alert (2004) discusses how on 14 September 2011, Liberian youths came up with the National Youth Code of Conduct, the preamble of which reads:

> Whereas, we the young people of the Republic of Liberia, representing the youth wing of various political parties, having closely followed recent incidents of pre and post-election violence in this sub-region and the threats posed to our emerging democracy in this new dispensation and, realizing that Liberia being our common patrimony, have resolved to adopt this draft code of conduct aimed at safeguarding our electoral process so as to ensure the sustainability of our fragile democracy in the ensuing 2011 presidential and legislative elections.
> (International Alert, 14 October 2011)

Although, in the past, youths have been used by politicians to execute violence, young people in Liberia are increasingly playing a vital role in underscoring the importance of non-violence in this fragile post-conflict country. During the research, the author learned about existing initiatives by young people to promote peacebuilding in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. For example, the National Association of Palava Managers, a Liberian youth initiative, conducts conflict resolution and peacebuilding work in schools and communities. Similarly, the Liberia Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) also engages in peace education with various groups, under the auspices of the Youth in Peacebuilding and Governance. These youth groups are involved in activities targeting economic, social and political levels. In preparation for the 2011 elections, the Liberia YMCA hosted a forum on the theme 'The National Elections: Creating a Platform for a Peaceful Liberia', in September 2011. The aim was to encourage youths to participate in the elections peacefully – as voters, supporters and candidates. Similarly, young people's aversion to electoral violence was aptly demonstrated during the presidential run-off elections in Liberia, when a coalition of youth groups cautioned one political party, the CDC, to abandon a series of demonstrations it had planned to carry out, following another win by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. A report by the online newspaper, AllAfrica.com (28 November 2011), mentions that four key youth groups in Liberia – the FLY, the Liberia National Student Union (LNSU), the Mano River Union Youth Parliament (MRUYP) and the University of Liberia Students Union (ULSU) – deplored the planned demonstrations, saying that these would undermine Liberia's democracy and fragile peace. The youth leaders called on young people and student organisations not to participate in any demonstrations, adding that their participation would be tantamount to their being manipulated by politicians.

Young people's political participation in Liberia is also evident. Increasingly, Liberian youths have become active in politics – exhibited not only in their participation in national politics but also in their preponderance in social movements and human rights activism. Ismail et al (2009) explain the rise of youths in civil rights activism in West Africa as a natural outcome of the restricted national political space. Ultimately, youths have to find a platform

to expend their energies towards social transformation, and the civil society arena provides such a space. Another initiative reflective of young people's interest in political participation is the Liberian Youth Parliament. Supported by UNICEF, the youth parliament was established to ensure the active involvement of young people in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policy decisions that affect them. Members of the youth parliament are voted for by both out-of-school and in-school youths in a nationwide electoral process. UNDP reports that the youth parliament is involved in initiatives such as advocacy and awareness-raising for children's rights. In 2005, it organised a one-day Child Rights Symposium, bringing together about 75 young people from Monrovia and surrounding areas (UNDP, 2006). In both the 2005 and 2011 post-conflict elections, the youth parliament played active roles in advancing the agenda of youth participation in politics and generating political dialogue on the engagement of youth and children in national and community development efforts. Through the Vote Your Future Campaign, in 2011, youths participated in encouraging people in registering for the elections, calling for non-violence throughout the electoral processes (AllAfrica.com, 11 July 2011). These developments in Liberia fulfil the observations by Ismail et al (2009), whose study in seven West African countries concludes that youths can utilise a wide range of political, economic and social opportunities – not only to unlock their agency and creativity, but also to cope with their exclusion and vulnerability.

One of the most often identified manifestations of youth conflict is the dichotomy between youths that exists along ethnic, ideological and political lines. Young people have the capacity to bridge these divides, and the most common vehicle is through interactions between various groups. This is why associational life is not only important but also quite common among Liberian youths. A culture of participating in voluntary associations is quite important, considering that post-conflict peacebuilding is dependent on the capacity for communities to bridge identity divisions. Peer-oriented and non-hierarchical youth civic associations are one of the most important vehicles for social cohesion, and it becomes even more important in a post-conflict society such as Liberia. Del Felice and Wisler (2007:24) propose: "One of youth's major contributions can be through peer group non-formal education. Young people and especially teenagers spend a lot

of time with their friends, and on many occasions they listen more to them than to their parents or teachers." Although youths do not constitute a homogeneous group, young Liberians have highlighted their shared identity to bridge their dichotomies and rebuild broken relationships. Several peer-level interactions, youth-focused associations and youth-led initiatives that build social capital, communicate a sense of community and promote the concept of shared identity, are observable in this young post-conflict country.

Sommers (2010:325) acknowledges the role of these associations, asserting: "At the end of a difficult day of searching for work or some action, joining peers to discuss economic, social and political events at dusk is an important way for male youth to create community and belonging in huge African cities." In Liberia, sports teams, motorcycle unions and voluntary youth associations are proving to be hugely valuable vehicles for reconciling previously broken relationships, strengthening existing bonds and bridging social and political divides. These youth-to-youth interactions have the potential to reduce the social distance between disparate groups, between individuals, and within society at large – hence the conclusion by Maclay and Ozerdem (2010:355) that "a denser associational life among youth could help tighten both horizontal and vertical social capital, as it would offer a more succinct and direct demand". The same networking approach has been employed by youths in post-conflict Sierra Leone, who have also formed several community-based youth associations that provide support to members, facilitate social control, enable socialisation and strengthen the youths' engagement with state and society.

Furthermore, Liberia now hosts several youth-led initiatives focusing on peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Well-known youth groups that focus on peacebuilding include the FLY, whose programmes include capacity building aimed at strengthening youth participation in policy formulation and implementation. Another good example is a project called Leadership for Human Security: Peace Building Project, which seeks to promote and strengthen social and institutional leadership capacities to address conflict through non-violence. Youths from Liberia constituted the Mano River Union Youth, Peace and Development Forum, which was held in 2005. This three-day forum was part of the larger Mano River Union Peace Initiative run by ECOWAS, with

support from international agencies. Held in Guinea (Conakry), the forum brought together 48 youth representatives from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to "develop a framework for the formulation of comprehensive sub-regional programmes to enhance youth participation in reconciliation, reconstruction and stabilisation efforts in the sub-region" (UNDP, 2006:51). Also at a regional level, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) established the Youth Employment Network for West Africa (YEN-WA) in 2006, to "raise awareness and to mainstream youth employment as both a political and a security issue". Observations of the author during a field visit in Liberia revealed that several organisations have also embarked on initiatives targeting core areas for youths, including unemployment, poverty, and limited education and training opportunities.

Realising that youths constitute a significant portion of the Liberian population, the post-conflict nationalist project in Liberia has increasingly situated youths at the centre of its plans for economic development. At a national level, the Liberian government has acknowledged the resourcefulness of young people in post-conflict reconstruction efforts through its policies and programmes. A good example is the 2005 National Youth Policy, which recognises that the concept of youth offers a potential unifying factor. In addition, Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) acknowledges youth engagement as one of the six fundamental areas for intervention in post-conflict Liberia. Furthermore, according to a USAID Report, a substantive amount of the Demobilisation, Disarmament, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) Trust Fund has been spent on youth. The Liberian government, local organisations and international agencies have begun to craft specific initiatives that are targeted at youths. Rather than conflating youths with general populations such as ex-combatants, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), the government has embarked on a blatantly youth-focused post-conflict reconstruction enterprise that singles out youths as targets of development initiatives. For example, the Liberian Emergency Employment Program and the Liberian Employment Action Plan both target a population defined as youth. In fact, Lopes and Pasipanodya (2008) surveyed post-conflict initiatives in Liberia and conclude that a third of these projects focus on youths. These developments are encouraging and will help in

demystifying the current perception of young people as victims and villains in fledgling peacebuilding processes.

Conclusion

Liberia's decades of civil war and political instability not only destroyed lives and decimated livelihoods, but also witnessed the massive participation of youths as both vehicles and victims of violence. Just like many other post-conflict countries in the developing world, Liberia has a youthful population that can either consolidate or diminish its fragile peace. Nonetheless, this chapter has tried to deconstruct the perception of youths as victims and sources of societal challenges, which is epitomised by the 'youth crisis', 'youth bulge' and 'lumpen youth' theories. While acknowledging the exceedingly difficult task of youth engagement in the present Liberian post-conflict environment, the chapter recognises the organic and instrumental efforts in which youths are engaged in towards supporting long-term post-conflict reconstruction. The chapter has outlined how Liberian youths are attempting to climb out of poverty and political oblivion by addressing several challenges that confront them as young generation in a post-conflict society. In this respect, this conclusion does not endorse the ongoing debate on the 'youth bulge' and 'youth crisis'. Rather, the chapter argues that in Liberia, the engagement and active participation of youth in political and socio-economic engineering is becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Although Liberia can hardly be pointed out as the best case study of youth engagement in post-conflict societies, the country has gone beyond the preposterous doomsday and victimology predictions of youth vulnerabilities and risks. Careful analysis reveals that there are pockets of youths in Liberia who have not responded to the post-conflict challenges of Liberia with violence, anti-establishment or criminality, as predicted by mainstream youth theories. Accordingly, this chapter has focused on the various ways in which youth in Liberia have renegotiated their transition to adulthood by searching for alternatives to the socio-economic, political and physical space provided by societal structures. The lesson is that there is a need to desist from focusing

on young people as victims, towards a more positive perception of youths as a resourceful community for peace and development. From a policy perspective, this chapter raises questions on the growing role of young people in post-conflict societies, including peacebuilding, political participation and economic engagement. Although this optimistic expression of youths as progressive and positive agents is admittedly at a formative stage, this chapter adds a voice to the emerging discourse on the potential role of youths in post-conflict societies. There is thus a need for further reflection, exploration, research, discussion and policy development on this important subject matter.

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