

**AN INITIAL ASSESSMENT OF FAO'S INTERVENTION TO  
EMPOWER VULNERABLE YOUTH FOR BUILDING PEACE AND  
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN KENEMA  
DISTRICT, SIERRA LEONE**

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2024.5304>

**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents an initial assessment of youth vulnerability to violence and crime, and the Food and Agricultural Organization's intervention in empowering them as agents of peacebuilding and fostering community resilience in Kenema District, Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. Given the high susceptibility of at-risk youth to violence and crime, their empowerment is crucial for peace and security in Sierra Leone. The study employed qualitative methods, including desk review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with stakeholders in visited communities. Despite some challenges, such as procurement delays, the FAO's contribution proved relevant, effective, and impactful. Through training, skills development, decision-making strategies, and provision of agricultural tools, equipment, and mentorship, young men and women were empowered to enhance social cohesion, contribute to peace building, and bolster community resilience. The paper also highlights FAO's role in facilitating the reintegration of at-risk youth into their families and communities, aiding their transition to adulthood. Despite challenges, the project aligned with national and local priorities, effectively reduced rural crime and violence, and empowered youth to participate in decision-making processes, promote social cohesion, and support community resilience initiatives.

**Keywords:** Youth-at-risk, Vulnerable, Empowerment, Marginalized, Community, Decision-making.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This research paper undertakes an initial evaluation of the Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO's) efforts in empowering youth facing precarious circumstances to become agents of peace building in Kenema District, Sierra Leone. The study holds significance due to the rampant and unchecked drug/substance abuse among the country's youth, posing a grave threat to national security. Within Sierra Leone, youths deemed at-risk

are identified as the primary challenge to peace and security, with FAO concentrating its efforts on removing these young individuals from the streets, aiming to facilitate their transition into responsible adulthood.

Constituting roughly 34% of the national population, Sierra Leonean youth encounter numerous hurdles, particularly in accessing decent employment, exacerbated by a dearth of job opportunities, notably in rural settings.<sup>1</sup> Factors such as limited employable skills, insufficient work experience, and low educational attainment contribute to the prevailing unemployment crisis, impeding the nation's functionality and post-war development recovery efforts following the brutal civil conflict spanning from 1991 to 2002 (Momoh 2002).

FAO's initiative primarily focuses on reintegration, aiming to reintroduce marginalized youth into their communities and families, fostering their contribution to community resilience and sustainable peace. Additionally, the program advocates for institutional reforms to address the root causes of youth recruitment into gangs and cliques. This research sheds light on the UN Agency's advocacy for increased youth participation in decision-making processes, bridging the gap between state and society. By promoting livelihood security through education, skill development, and enhanced access to prevention and protection services, FAO endeavours to foster sustained peace, social cohesion, and the development of resilient communities.

### 1.1 Dealing with the Youth Crisis in Sierra Leone

The youth crisis in Sierra Leone is a prevalent issue, with vulnerable young individuals struggling to transition into adulthood and make meaningful contributions to development. These youths often lack basic education, skills, and opportunities for job readiness, rendering them susceptible to substance abuse, crime, and violence (Schonert-Reichl 2000; Betanmount 2018). Krijn (2011) asserts that numerous factors contribute to this crisis, including negative familial interactions, societal norms, economic deprivation, gender violence, marginalization, and peer pressure.

Politicians often exploit these vulnerable youths, recruiting them from cliques and gangs for nefarious purposes, particularly during election cycles (Momoh et al 2022; Martin and Koroma 2020). FAO's intervention targeted this demographic, aimed at addressing these challenges and advancing their interests in peacebuilding, livelihood security, community resilience, and national cohesion initiatives. By facilitating access to opportunities and services provided by government and development partners at various levels, FAO's intervention aligned with the objectives outlined in the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy of 2022, which seek to unleash the full potential of Sierra Leonean youth and institutionalize their participation in decision-making processes.

Moreover, FAO engages with different security actors to promote human rights, the rule of law, and youth-sensitive approaches, aiming to rebuild trust and confidence in national institutions, particularly the Sierra Leone Police (SLP). Low public trust in the SLP poses a significant threat to peace and security, necessitating concerted efforts to enhance community-police

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<sup>1</sup> See the National Development Plan for Sierra Leone 2024-2030, for details

relations through public education and sensitization campaigns.<sup>2</sup> The International Republican Institute (IRI) carried out a survey in 2022 which established that 41 per cent Sierra Leoneans reported a great deal of distrust and 24 per cent saying the somewhat distrust the police.<sup>3</sup>

Given that agriculture remains the backbone of Sierra Leone's economy, supporting this sector is crucial for national and sub-national economic development. FAO's initiatives, including providing agricultural inputs, training in good agronomic practices, and promoting agribusiness development, align with the objectives outlined in the Gender in Agriculture Policy and the National Climate Change Policy, contributing to economic growth, gender equality, climate resilience, and sustainable natural resource management.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed a combination of qualitative methodologies, with a primary focus on desk review, content analysis, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs). The literature review and content analysis concentrated on both project-related documents and external sources, including peacebuilding strategies for youth, community resilience, livelihood security, and voice and participation. External documents reviewed encompassed research and policy reports from the Sierra Leonean government, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report, scholarly studies, and reports from local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as multilateral organizations. Additionally, relevant literature addressing youth violence prevention and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone was examined.

Qualitative methods were utilized to assess the effectiveness, impact, and challenges encountered during project implementation. KIIs and FGDs played a crucial role in gauging progress, identifying limitations, assessing impacts, and deriving lessons learned. A total of 32 KIIs and 26 FGDs were conducted, engaging a diverse array of participants including youths, community leaders, traditional rulers, women's and youth groups, religious leaders, and local and state officials. Data collection involved comprehensive note-taking, with subsequent compilation and analysis throughout the research process. KIIs and FGDs followed a semi-structured format tailored to the knowledge of informants, guiding conversations while allowing flexibility. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that interactions with external stakeholders and informants adhered to a gender- and youth-sensitive approach, considering other relevant vulnerability characteristics to ensure inclusivity in all data collection methods.

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<sup>2</sup> ACLED, 2020, *When Emerging Democracy Breeds Violence, Sierra Leone 20 Years after the Civil War*, Joint report produced by ACLED, Clingendael, WANEP.

<sup>3</sup> IRI, 2022, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Sierra Leone December 16, 2021 – January 16, 2022*, <https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/SLE-22-NS-01-Vendors-Deck-V3.pdf> (2 September 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The Government of Sierra Leone, "Gender in Agriculture Policy (GiAP)," <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/sie216589.pdf>

### 3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS: RELEVANCE TO THE POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Our initial assessment revealed that the FAO project was highly successful and relevant to the political, socio-economic, and environmental context of Sierra Leone at institutional, national, and local levels. Aligned with key national and local priorities and policies, the intervention promoted youth empowerment, enhanced the responsiveness of local institutions, and fostered social cohesion and economic development as pathways to peace in the project district. Moreover, the project was in line with global development efforts outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and corresponding United Nations development strategies in Sierra Leone.

The project's alignment with Sierra Leone's Medium-term National Development Plan (MTNDP) 2019-2023 was notable, particularly its contribution to Goal 3: fostering a peaceful, cohesive, secure, and just society. Of particular significance were the peacebuilding and security-related impacts of the project, which were highlighted during Sierra Leone's Presidential, Parliamentary, and Local Council elections held on June 24, 2023.

In the lead-up to these elections, Sierra Leone experienced heightened political violence, including physical confrontations between political party supporters, security institutions, and communities, exacerbated by hate speech on social media platforms. Notably, the violence peaked in August 2022, resulting in the tragic deaths of six police officers and over twenty protesters and bystanders. This period marked one of the highest levels of political instability since the end of the civil war in 2002, with electoral-related violence accounting for a significant portion of all political disturbances in Sierra Leone.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1 Project Effectiveness: Youth in Agriculture

The literature review, key informant interviews (KIIs), and focus group discussions (FGDs) underscored agriculture's paramount importance as the most productive sector in rural Sierra Leone, engaging over 70% of the population in rural communities (UNDP 2023). In response, the FAO initiative focused on involving youth in agricultural production within the reviewed district. The rationale behind this approach was to offer young men and women a dignified source of income while deterring them from involvement in criminal activities and substance abuse. This strategy proved effective, as respondents conveyed that abstaining from drug use necessitates meaningful engagement to prevent relapse into previous harmful behaviours. Agriculture emerged as the central focus, serving as a pathway for individuals to transition away from their former lifestyles.

Moreover, agricultural engagement played a significant role in diverting attention from gang affiliations and violent tendencies. It fostered a positive sense of identity among beneficiaries, enhancing their self-worth and validating their transformation into active community members,

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<sup>5</sup> Awoko Publications, 2023, Salone among 10 Countries with Highest Food Price Inflation, 18 April, <https://awokonewspaper.sl/salone-among-10-countries-with-highest-food-price-inflation-world-bank/> (2 September 2023).

earning recognition from stakeholders, neighbours, and previously sceptical family members. The agricultural livelihood component also yielded notable peacebuilding effects, as full engagement in productive activities reduced the likelihood of involvement in conflicts and violence, contrasting with idleness, which often leads to susceptibility to negative influences, such as political exploitation.

Farming stood as the predominant livelihood among communities visited, including youth-at-risk, with the livelihood component proving crucial. Despite varying levels of prior agricultural experience among beneficiaries, the support provided, including inputs, equipment, technical training, and efforts to strengthen group cohesion, significantly enhanced productivity. While systematic data on agricultural income or yields was lacking, qualitative research highlighted impactful outcomes. For instance, one community reported a substantial profit from selling harvested cassava, demonstrating tangible economic benefits.

However, challenges persisted, with evidence indicating that agriculture primarily remained at subsistence levels due to a lack of skills, equipment, seedlings, and knowledge for large-scale farming. The delayed supply and distribution of farming tools, equipment, and seedlings exacerbated these challenges, hindering the completion of infrastructure for youth livelihood activities. This, in turn, affected the distribution of equipment and supplies linked to agricultural processing, limiting the youth to less profitable activities such as maize farming and unprocessed cassava sales.

Despite these challenges, the agricultural livelihoods component yielded significant benefits, albeit somewhat diminished. Timely delivery of project outputs, youth livelihood infrastructure, and agricultural equipment emerged as critical factors influencing impact. Addressing these challenges could further enhance the effectiveness of the project in empowering youth through agricultural engagement.

### **3.2 Youth Engagement in Decision-Making Processes**

Involving critical actors in decision-making processes is essential for upholding principles of responsiveness, accountability, participation, and transparency, while also ensuring the inclusion of their voices, promoting inclusivity, and empowering agency. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that prior to the project intervention, youth were often marginalized from participating in community development activities and decision-making processes. They were largely overlooked as key stakeholders in decisions that directly affected their lives. However, FAO's intervention has significantly shifted this dynamic. Today, youth are actively engaged in meaningful roles, assisting stakeholders in various communities with local development initiatives.

Youth now have the opportunity to raise issues, voice concerns, and contribute constructively to decision-making processes alongside local leaders, a privilege they were previously denied. For example, some community leaders have supported the inclusion of young men and women in the chief's court to arbitrate disputes, oversee development projects, access livelihood

support, and participate in information dissemination efforts, particularly related to gender-based violence (GBV).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, youth have become actively involved in monitoring project implementation and providing assistance where possible. One participant proudly highlighted how youth are now involved in investigating theft cases and participating in dispute resolution alongside traditional chiefs, a role previously unthinkable for them. This represents a significant departure from past norms, where youth were often unjustly labelled as criminals and excluded from decision-making processes within their communities.

The success of youth reintegration is evident in the positive sentiments expressed by youth from various areas, reflecting a shift from past experiences characterized by acrimony, isolation, and stigma to one of support and welcome from community leadership. Another notable impact is the increased representation of youth in the District Youth Council and Chiefdom Youth Council (DYC/CYC), which has empowered youth and enhanced sustainability and ownership of community development initiatives. The involvement of youth-at-risk in these councils fosters a conducive environment for sustainable peace and community development, as they become leaders within their respective chiefdoms and actively contribute to project sustainability efforts

### 3.3 Youth Promoting Peace and Community Resilience

Promoting peace and fostering community resilience are integral components of the United Nations' efforts in post-conflict countries. Understanding the root causes of conflicts and charting a path towards lasting peace are paramount in UN peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>7</sup> FAO's intervention aligns with this approach, aiming to enhance the capacities of security and civilian authorities, as well as civil society organizations, to address youth vulnerability while upholding human rights and dignity. In Sierra Leone, youth in precarious circumstances are recognized as significant threats to peace and security, particularly during national elections, as they are often exploited by local and national political entities for various purposes, including as rally attendees or security personnel.<sup>8</sup>

Recent economic challenges in Sierra Leone have exacerbated the vulnerability of young people to political manipulation and violence. With the country already among the world's least developed nations, skyrocketing inflation has further worsened living conditions for many. According to the World Food Programme, a significant percentage of households spend a

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<sup>6</sup> See UNDP, 2022, *Capturing the Socioeconomic and Cultural Drivers of Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Sierra Leone for details.*

<sup>7</sup> UNDP, "Human Development Reports: Sierra Leone," <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SLE> (2 September 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, "Sierra Leone: Seven months after August's Protests which Turned Violent in Some Locations, No Justice Yet for Those Injured or The Families of Those Killed", September 2023. See also, the Special investigation Committee report 2023, August 8-10, 2022, for more details

substantial portion of their income on food, and a large proportion of the population faces food insecurity. Moreover, structural unemployment among youth is alarmingly high, with many struggling to secure stable employment opportunities. In this context, providing livelihood opportunities for marginalized youth is crucial for enhancing security in targeted communities. Stakeholders interviewed emphasized that offering alternative livelihoods to socioeconomically deprived youth helps weaken the grip of gangs and cliques, facilitating their reintegration into families and communities.

Youth empowerment in Sierra Leone faces numerous challenges, including a lack of trust from older community members and intimidation from elderly decision-makers, leading to their exclusion from decision-making processes. This exclusion has long fuelled frustration among young people in Sierra Leone. During the civil war, military involvement provided young people with a means to assert themselves against a society that had marginalized them socially and economically (Krijn and Richards 1998).

Qualitative evidence from interviews and focus group discussions suggests a decline in crime and violence across project communities, although no statistical data is available to corroborate these claims. Participants frequently cited reduced incidents of theft, fighting, sexual abuse, and violence. Local police officers attribute this decrease to collaborative efforts with the District Youth Council (DYC), while chiefs and community leaders note a decrease in reported incidents. These observations indicate positive outcomes resulting from collaborative initiatives aimed at promoting peace and resilience within communities.

### 3.4 Some Critical Challenges

Despite the accomplishments highlighted earlier, several challenges and concerns have emerged that could potentially impact sustainable peace and community resilience.

1. Over-reliance on the project has become evident in the communities, potentially hindering beneficiaries' ability to engage in independent agricultural activities. This dependency raises concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the project's impact and has led to frustration among youth participants.
2. There is a lack of clear communication regarding the project's exit strategy. Many beneficiaries are uncertain about what will happen after the project concludes. Establishing transparent communication channels and articulating a well-defined exit plan are crucial to preventing beneficiaries from being left in a state of uncertainty. The absence of a clear exit strategy poses a significant challenge to the project's sustainability.
3. Ensuring the project's sustainability necessitates addressing issues related to mobility and capacity at both district and field levels. Adequate supervision and monitoring are essential, and staff mobility plays a crucial role in facilitating effective project implementation and sustainability. Additionally, improved communication channels are identified as critical factors in promoting sustainability.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research paper affirms the largely successful outcomes of the FAO project, notwithstanding the challenges and concerns outlined above. The project has empowered young men and women, integrating them into decision-making processes within their communities. Furthermore, it has catalyzed improvements in the responsiveness of national and local institutions to the needs of vulnerable youth, fostering social cohesion and empowering at-risk youth to become valuable contributors to community development and peacebuilding efforts.

The assessment confirms the project's alignment with national and local priorities, as well as its efficacy in addressing key government agendas related to youth empowerment, institutional responsiveness, and socio-economic development. Effective coordination structures have been established to guide project implementation, contributing to notable achievements in reducing violence and crime within project communities. Notably, clique and gang activities have significantly diminished, with no incidents of electoral violence reported among project communities during the 2023 presidential elections.

Moreover, the project has facilitated the reintegration of marginalized individuals into their families and communities, providing institutional support to security and correctional services, promoting gender awareness, and bolstering district and chiefdom youth structures. Despite these accomplishments, challenges remain, particularly regarding the delayed handover of youth livelihood infrastructure and materials, leading to frustrations among community members. Clear communication and a well-defined exit strategy are imperative to address these concerns and ensure the sustainability of project outcomes.

In summary, while the FAO project has achieved considerable success in empowering youth and fostering community resilience, addressing remaining challenges and implementing strategies for sustainability will be crucial for maximizing its long-term impact on peace and development in the project district.

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