

# Education reconstruction in post-conflict Sierra Leone



## Alpha Tejan Wurie

### Introduction

The West African State of Sierra Leone has a population of about five million. It is blessed with lush forests, fertile land, and several minerals, including diamond, gold and iron. Divided into a Colony and Protectorate in colonial times, the Colony was home to indigenous Sierra Leoneans and freed slaves primarily from Nova Scotia, the West Indies, and recaptives from Nigeria and Ghana. The cultural cocktail of Christians, Muslims and 'Natives' with traditional African religious practices threatened peaceful co-existence in the Colony.

Western-type education was introduced. This favoured would-be clergy, good Christian wives, and support staff to the colonial administration. Generally, residents in the Colony enjoyed significant advantage over those in the Protectorate, who were left to their own devices insofar as education was concerned. Freetown in the Colony, the country's capital, was home to the first all boys' school in West Africa (1845), the first all girls' school (1849), and the first university in sub-Saharan Africa (1827). It was not until 1906 that the first secondary school, the Bo School, was started in the Protectorate. Even then, it was only for the sons and nominees of Chiefs. The first school in the Protectorate for common folk was only established in 1953, 100 years after the first school in the Colony, and only 8 years before Independence in 1961. For a very long time, Protectorate Sierra Leoneans and their descendants were playing catch-up with those in the Colony.

Most of Sierra Leone's educated elite resided in the Colony; and Freetown, the seat of government, housed the bulk of the administrative and academic elite. But the majority of Sierra Leone's political leadership came from the Protectorate, many of them with limited or no education. Although the great majority of Sierra Leoneans lived in the Protectorate, endowed with vast agricultural and mineral wealth, the allocation of resources was skewed in favour of the capital.

In the Protectorate, traditional leaders were losing their authority to 'commoners' who acquired political power through education. They too were caught between the wrath of the traditional leaders and that of the uneducated common folk who were in the majority. For most of these, a grammar school type of education was both inaccessible and unaffordable. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1991, only four out of every 10 school-age children could access education. For most, the cost of education was

prohibitive, and training facilities for skills were negligible. Uneducated and unskilled, most of Sierra Leone's youth were unemployable. Their ranks grew as the population grew.

Frustrated by years of misrule and mismanagement, ravaged by poverty and provided with an education unable to lift them from their plight, youths were 'conned' into taking arms.

For a decade, Sierra Leone experienced every act of savagery imaginable during the conflict. Girls were raped, children were kidnapped and made slaves, educational institutions were burnt, and religious places desecrated.

Hundreds of schools, one of the two university colleges of Sierra Leone, and three of the four teacher training colleges in the provinces were also burnt.

We see then that, since Independence, Sierra Leone has had:

- a growing population
- an ever-widening gap between the traditional leaders, the 'educated' and the political leaders
- education that appears inadequate and inappropriate
- a disenchanting population of youths
- resource allocation that appears to favour an educated and Freetown elite; at the expense of the uneducated majority of the population who own the bulk of the natural wealth of the nation.

### Post-conflict Sierra Leone

The signing of the Peace Accord in 2000 signalled the formal end of hostilities, but not an end to the causes of the war. The message from Sierra Leone's war was loud and clear. The youths were angry. There was immediate need for an increase in the number of choices available to them, especially if they were to break out of the poverty trap that engulfed them. Their fears had to be banished, and hope restored. The government and civil society believed education was the answer, but it was not going to be the type of education that had been the source of so much despair for so many. Education was to serve as a change agent in reshaping the country's priorities and redirecting the youths' anger and mindsets for positive change.

Emphasis would be placed on skills acquisition, guidance and counselling, and the less tangible areas of social and moral



behaviour. Greater flexibility would be introduced, allowing entry at different levels and movement up the educational ladder from different starting points. The government went to work immediately.

### The education system

The traditional system of education inherited from the former colonial power was not flexible enough to allow achievement of the peace and reconciliation that post-conflict Sierra Leone hoped for. Consequently the 6-3-3-4 system of education, which was first adopted in 1993, was slightly modified to make it possible for ex-combatants, youths and young adults denied education by the conflict; children in isolated communities; and child mothers, to gain access to education. Furthermore, the system had to be able to accommodate shortened primary school and teacher training programmes, as well as making more lateral movements possible.

### Healing the trauma

Because the country had suffered severe trauma, the government realised – even before the formal peace declaration – that recovery from the terrible ordeal required work on the minds of the peoples. Guidance and counselling thus became important aspects of the modified school curriculum. The Guidance and Counseling Unit of the Ministry of Education was put into ‘overdrive’. Syllabuses were revisited to bring in elements of Peace and HIV–AIDS education. High-intensity games, such as football, volleyball and athletics, were considered good methods for healing trauma. Parents and wards now appreciate the value of education and gladly send their children to school.

### Government resources

Damage to the education infrastructure during the conflict had been massive and well beyond the capacity of the government to repair. Even with more of our GDP being spent on education than on health and defence, government-generated revenue was insufficient to fund all of the education needs. External assistance was sought. The resources obtained from funding from banks, bilateral and multilateral agencies, were only useful insofar as they contributed to reducing poverty and achieving those educational objectives of the government that lessened the possibility of youths returning ‘back to the bush’. To this end, funds were obtained for interventions which were in harmony with the government’s goals for education. These are listed below.

#### Construct, reconstruct and rehabilitate schools

Using its own funds, the government commenced work on the reconstruction of destroyed schools. Civil Society partners; the European Union; Department for International Development (DFID); African Development Bank (ADB); World Bank; Islamic Development Bank; and others all joined in. The biggest input came in via a US\$42 million project, which was jointly funded by the government of Sierra Leone, the World Bank, and the ADB. Recognising our dire need, the World Bank changed what had initially been a US\$20 million loan to a grant. This project, now known locally as the Sababu Education Project, targets the reconstruction and rehabilitation of approximately 500 primary

schools nationwide, and 100 junior secondary schools. It also provides for furnishing Sababu schools; training 6000 teachers; training school management committees; supplying textbooks; and constructing, renovating, or repairing vocational skills training facilities. Overall, including the Sababu intervention, it is estimated that approximately 2,100 schools – approximately half of all schools in Sierra Leone – will have benefited from civil works by 2008.

#### Complimentary Rapid Education for Primary Schools (CREPS)

Before and during the conflict, many school-age children were unable to access schools for a variety of reasons. Many had reached the age of 15 years and above by the end of the war, but had either only acquired one or two years of schooling, or no primary education. In conjunction with UNICEF and selected NGOs, therefore, condensed primary school programmes were launched in which 6 years of primary schooling were reduced to 3 years. This gave hope to a large number of young people.

The uptake of the CREPS programme, coupled with a feeding programme, proved very encouraging. Many accessing the programme are now in secondary schools and doing well.

#### Reducing the cost of education

Given the abject poverty of the majority of the population, post-conflict recovery necessitated not only providing education, but making it affordable. To this end, the government decided to provide:

- free basic education
- teaching/learning materials for schools
- free textbooks in the core subjects for all primary-level pupils
- free school-level examinations.

The cost of these interventions on the part of the government was always rising. But there were significant gains. Primary school enrolment rose from 367,920 in 1996/7 to 1,292,073 in 2004/5. School completion rates increased significantly as shown from the three public school examinations (NPSE, BECE and WASSCE; see Table 1): at the end of primary (NPSE); end of junior secondary school (JSS); and end of senior secondary school (SSS).

#### Gender disparities in access and completion of education

The ratio of males to females in the Sierra Leone population is approximately 1:1. Yet this fact is not reflected in school enrolment nor in level of completion. At the primary level the rate of boys to girls is now is 1:0.8, indicating that we are approaching gender parity at this level. This is not the case at the junior secondary level, however, as reflected in the end of junior secondary examination results (see Table 2).

Knowing the importance of having an educated mother on the well-being of the family and the nation, as at 2004, the government is further providing ‘free’ education for girls, which includes fees, teaching/learning materials, and uniforms for girls starting junior secondary in the badly affected Northern and Eastern regions.



### Skills training opportunities

The large scale involvement of youths with little or no education in the Sierra Leone conflict, underscored the need for education leading to saleable skills and gainful employment.

Technical/vocational institutions provided the answer. They deliver saleable skills to thousands, including ex-combatants; whilst at the same time providing for those with the aptitude and desire the foundations necessary for entry into higher education institutions. Government intervention here took the form of providing support to more private technical/vocational institutions through grants and subventions so that their charges would be minimal. The government is now also constructing more technical/vocational institutions.

With government input, technical/vocational education enrolment and provisions have more than doubled. Their effectiveness and the arrangements put in place to absorb their graduates will, the government hopes, impact on the socio-economic stability of Sierra Leone.

### Tertiary-level education

The government was concerned that, until very recently, tertiary-level programmes were very limited in scope. The government urged expansion, and it is pleasing to note that the tertiary-level institutions now offer quite a wide range of courses, including training for laboratory technicians, nursing assistants, and community health nurses; and now offer degrees in nursing. This trend will continue.

### Teachers and their training

Teachers and teaching have been a major growth area in the workforce. Increases in enrolment at all levels and the construction of new and expanded institutions demand this. From the year 2000 to the academic year 2004/5, the number of teachers on the government payroll increased from 19,000 to 28,000. With the number of trained and qualified teachers in the system increasing significantly over the same period, that is from 60% to 75%, the financial commitment of the government has also risen markedly.

The increase in the number of trained and qualified teachers has come about primarily through the introduction of a distance learning programme for teachers. It is anticipated that with the start of the new one-year teacher training programme for teachers of lower classes, the percentage of trained and qualified teachers in the system will increase further. The additional government expenditure will be high, but the estimated improvement in the quality of teaching and learning at the primary level will be much higher.

### Legislation

The following major legislations have been adopted since the year 2000:

- Education Act, 2004
- Polytechnic Act, 2001
- National Council for Technical/Vocational and other Academic Awards Act, 2001

**Table 1** Number of entries to public school examinations

Year	National Primary School Examination (NPSE) entries	Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) entries	West Africa Senior School Examination (WASSCE) entries
1995	20,534		
1996	20,691	12,005	
1997/8	23,842	19,718	
1999	19,907	16,785	
2000	21,216	18,814	1,899
2001	26,451	19,500	4,523
2002	35,424	24,517	8,037
2003	47,514	29,696	11,167
2004	62,316	32,164	11,730
2005	78,899	36,000	13,385

**Table 2** Candidates for the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE)

Sex	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Female	7123	7443	8912	10897	11537
Male	11241	11938	15497	18796	20611



- Tertiary Education Commission Act, 2001
- Universities Act, 2005

All of this legislation indicates the way forward for education for the next 10 to 15 years, and has emanated from lessons learned and wide-ranging consultations.

### Poverty and education

Post-conflict Sierra Leone is using education to unify the country, to sustain peace and good health, and most importantly, to fight poverty.

Our poverty profile shows that 70% of the population is below the poverty line, and 26% lives in extreme poverty.

Education is seen as key in the war against poverty; hence our education policies primarily target children and youth. The Millennium Development Goal Report in Sierra Leone says that, for all educational levels up to tertiary, the incidence of poverty is less if the household is headed by a female. This is heartening, especially given the increasing number of single-parent families headed by women. This also strongly endorses our support to the girl-child education project.

### Our brain drain

The social unrest experienced by Sierra Leone in the past can be directly traced to the desire to escape from poverty and its effects. Our best efforts at recovery and reconstruction of education notwithstanding, 'our brains' are deserting us. Our most able graduates are employed by UN Agencies and the national arm of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and their postings take them away from the nation for most, if not all, of their useful working lives. For our nurses and medical doctors, the situation is even more alarming. Our only medical school has, since its inception, trained approximately 100 doctors. Only five are presently serving in Sierra Leone. Before the civil conflict, Sierra Leone had 368 medical doctors. Only 64 of these are presently resident in Sierra Leone. We are trying to recover, but our recovery is not fully in our hands.

### Conclusion

Sierra Leone's post-conflict education reconstruction and recovery lessons have been many. We experienced conflict primarily because we did not use or allocate our abundant natural resources properly, and the education system failed the people.

We have made significant advances, but we are struggling because of poverty. Our expenditure continues to be greater than our revenue. In short, we entered into conflict because of poverty, and we continue to struggle on the road to success because of poverty.

Not everything is bleak however. We are taking education to places it has never been in the past; we are improving quality and relevance; we are giving ownership of education back to communities and empowering them; we are bridging the gender gap; we are devising strategies to help us escape from the dark pit of despair and poverty.

We are a strong and able people. We have made our mistakes but we are moving on. With education as our vehicle, we are certain of achieving our goal of lasting peace and sustainable prosperity for our nation.

### Biographical notes

**Dr Alpha Tejan Wurie** has, since 1996, served as Minister of Education, Science and Technology, of the Republic of Sierra Leone.

He was born in Freetown, Sierra Leone. After graduating from the Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone with an honours degree in Chemistry, he obtained his PhD from Brunel University of West London in Industrial Chemistry. After serving for 14 years as a lecturer in the chemistry department at his alma mater, he was appointed Minister of Education.

Among its principal goals, Dr Wurie's ministry seeks to: foster appropriate policies and programmes designed to encourage the development of interest in science at primary level; implement scientific and technological principle and practice at both junior and senior secondary school levels; equip science and vocational laboratories and workshops; both encourage indigenous technology and efficiently absorb and adopt imported technology; enhance the role of science and technology in economic and social development; and also to work in partnership with other ministries, local and international organisations.