

“Now things are Zig-Zag”

*Perceptions of the Impact of Armed
Conflict on Young People in Liberia*

By Una McCauley



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Executive Summary

This piece of exploratory research was undertaken over a period of five months and involved 28 children and young people aged between thirteen and nineteen. The findings reflect over forty hours of discussions with the children and young people and the outcome of some 120 informal and semi structured interviews that they carried out with peers, family and community members.

The work was undertaken in post war Liberia¹. The research is an attempt to understand the impact of conflict on the lives of young people as they see it, and the social and economic changes they believe war created for them. The study does not catalogue changes in family income and the coping mechanisms used to address those changes as such. Rather it is a look at how the socio-economic and political and military environment has affected their way of thinking and understanding of social organisation.

The research reveals that, underpinning the many changes they perceive is an alteration in power structures in personal, family and community relationships, and also at the national level. The change has been brought about an increasing emphasis on who has money – and who has connections with those who have money and power associated with the war and the government.

Perhaps the clearest message to emerge from the study is about the way in which economic and employment considerations have resulted in major changes in family roles and responsibilities. In particular, the diminished role of the adult male as the principal breadwinner has had enormous implications not only for men (especially in terms of their power and self-esteem), but also for women and young people. There has been a tendency for young people to invest more of their time and energy outside of the family. Paradoxically, in a context in which people have obviously become poorer and in which young people have had to take on additional economic roles, they generally have more and not less access to money, and in turn this has given young people greater freedom and autonomy. This has had an impact on the quality of family life, on children's behaviour and on the ways in which they spend their leisure time. It has led to a decreased parental influence on young people's behaviour, a greater exposure to the norms and values of street life and more involvement on what several people referred to as adult activities.

There is clearly perceived to have been a sharp rise in violence as a result of the war. This has manifested itself in domestic violence, crime and sexual violence, often affecting children as well as adults. It appears that prostitution has increased markedly.

The decline in educational standards, in the ethos of schools, and in the quality of teaching are of great concern to young people and to adults. The widespread “buying” of grades from teachers, for money or for sex, is another illustration of the commercialisation of personal relationships.

While these changes are reported as being negative, there are some surprising outcomes from the interviews and discussions that suggest that many of the young people involved see some of the impacts of war as being of benefit to them. This is particularly stark in terms of the newly found economic power children and young people have which, they believe, increasingly allows them to participate in decision-making. However, the research also reveals that the young people involved have ambivalent feelings about the two worlds they inhabit. On the one hand they have a clear definition of what “normal times” looked like and how things “should be”. This is a world in which traditional authority is respected; morality is based on “family values” and parents exercise control in the home as well as providing children with guidance. On the other hand the new order in which power is based on having money and contacts with the war or authorities is one that they understand and have learned to operate within.

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List of Abbreviations

ECOMOG	Economic Community Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation

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1. Background and Context of the Study

In Africa where, at this time, 18 of 53 countries can be said to be involved with, or emerging from, armed conflict, it is hard to distinguish between war affected and economically and socially vulnerable children. It is widely accepted that those children most likely to become separated from their families, recruited into armed groups or forced into hazardous economic activity during war are those who already belong to economically and socially vulnerable families and communities. It is also well known that war creates poverty and that the longer war and instability continue, the worse the economic and social toll. On almost every human development indicator list, six of the last ten countries are African countries currently affected by conflict or still facing post-conflict crises.

Save the Children Sweden became interested in undertaking research with youth and children to understand further how they and their communities perceive the ways in which the economic and social impact of armed conflict has affected them. The first study was undertaken in Liberia, West Africa with Don Bosco Homes, an NGO that works with an extensive network of children and youth who have experience with participatory processes.

Liberia is a small coastal republic in West Africa, bordered by Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. The estimated pre-war population was approximately two and a half million. Liberia is a country that is rich in diamonds, gold and several other prized minerals. It is home to some of the little remaining virgin rain forest in Africa. Returned slaves coming from the USA established the Republic in 1847 and since then the country was ruled by the descendants of the returned slaves, known as "Settlers", "Congos" or "Americo-Liberians". Administration was characterised by corruption, capital flight to the United States and the use of distorted secretive societies and Masonic structures to maintain power. This small and oppressive elite maintained its rule over the indigenous population until 1980 when a member of the Krahn tribe, Sergeant Samuel Doe, took power in a coup and in subsequent elections was confirmed as President.

Throughout the cold war Liberia was of immense importance to the USA. Initially Doe received much support from America and was able to maintain his presidency for almost ten years. During the Doe years there were some significant changes in Liberian power structures and for the first time indigenous people could access third level education and formal sector jobs without the patronage of a member of the Congo elite; this did not sit comfortably with the Americo-Liberians. However, despite some

progress for ordinary people, the Doe years were also marred by ever increasing corruption and violence.

At Christmas 1989 a small rebel band, headed by Charles Taylor, himself an Americo-Liberian, entered Liberia from the north. The group was quick to capture terrain and the imagination of indigenous Liberians who were not ethnic Krahn. Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia split within its first year and in a short time factions were fighting each other and government forces. Liberia was involved in one of the bloodiest civil wars seen in the late twentieth century. An opponent of Taylor's killed Doe in 1990. The international community, headed by the Economic Community of West African States, (ECOWAS), created a "war-free" zone around Monrovia, the capital. This was governed by a series of puppet political structures and "protected" by West African peacekeeping forces ECOMOG. By 1994 there were seven factions, including the peacekeepers, fighting Liberia's war¹.

The war was devastating; what little investment existed in national infrastructure was destroyed, the country was parcelled up into faction-held terrain based on gaining access to natural resources and key strategic means of getting resources out of the country (port and border towns). 700,000 people took refuge in neighbouring countries, the same number again were internally displaced to ECOMOG-held areas and others were displaced within faction-held territory. An estimated 200,000 people died in the war, and despite Liberia's fertility, many died of starvation. Those who stayed within faction-held territory were effectively enslaved by the armed groups and were unable to move. Psychological warfare, which distorted traditional beliefs in the supernatural, was used as effectively as physical violence by all sides. In 1993 Unicef estimated that one child in two living in Monrovia had seen the killing or rape of a close relative by faction members during the war. An estimated 15,000 children became involved in the conflict as fighters, an unknown number as bearers, cooks and sex slaves for fighters, and tens of thousands became separated from their families. Infant survival and literacy rates plummeted and violence and poverty thrived.

After a major outbreak of fighting in 1996 that crippled both Monrovia and the international community (including ECOMOG), a negotiated settlement led to elections in 1997. Charles Taylor, whose manifesto could be summarised in the pledge he made to restart the war if he was not elected, won the elections. Liberia's electorate went to the polls chanting ironically "He killed my Ma, he killed my Pa and he's the one I will vote for".

Since the elections the situation in Liberia has deteriorated and peace remains a "fragile" if not mythical reality. Taylor has created numerous security forces, and human rights abuses and corruption are rampant. The scale of the destruction of rain

forest and the sale of minerals are huge, and the use of the resultant revenue to purchase weapons for on-going conflict in the north of the country means there has been almost no investment in any section of the public sector since 1997. Monrovia continues to be a city with no running water or electricity supply. Formal sector employment is minimal and low ranking civil servants have experienced months and years of pay delays. There seems little prospect for change in the immediate future.

Don Bosco Homes works in the urban areas of Liberia, initially providing care and shelter for children affected by conflict and those sleeping on the streets. During the demobilisation of 1996/7 it provided care for ex-child soldiers who could not go home immediately and offered skills training to ex-combatant children and youth in communities. The work of Don Bosco has increasingly become focused on the wider child protection issues being confronted by children in general in Liberia's urban areas. Working with and through youth and children the organisation has established networks within schools and communities for child protection and the promotion of children's rights. The networks use sport, culture, video clubs, social and outreach workers, churches, schools and community leaders involving up to 2,000 children and youths. The young people, who come from all walks of life, are not selected to form part of the work but opt into the networks voluntarily. While this can mean that the levels of understanding and commitment vary, it does indicate that there is an understanding of what the problems are and a desire to work towards improving the situation for other children and youngsters. Young people are given training in child rights and child protection as well as in conflict management, and are expected to help find means of protecting children and their rights within their own spheres.

2. Research Rationale, Strategy and Methods

All too often children affected by armed conflict are seen as distinct categories of children by those designing or supporting responses to their needs. Responses are often focused on immediate service provision for their immediate physical protection and their perceived psychological needs. In the post-war period donors emphasise rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation, with the basic assumption that the fabric of their communities is strong enough to sustain and weave these processes together. Resources are often directed at skills training, educational infrastructure and family and community support through micro grants and credit.

Responses to the needs of children affected by armed conflict need to be seen both in terms of the immediate and fixable, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the light of the longer-term socio-economic contexts and realities in which they find themselves. This often means within community and social structures that are very fragile.

Children and youth have been excluded, until very recently, from the processes of designing responses to their needs: there are few genuine attempts to find meaningful ways to consult children on what the issues are, and even fewer to involve them as participants in programme thinking. Children affected by armed conflict do not see themselves as “separated children”, “child soldiers” or “children with trauma”. These are socially constructed categories that do not describe their realities². They view themselves as important social and economic actors in their families, peer groups and communities.

The views and understanding of children and youth need to be factored into the fundamental thinking of agencies if they are going to be able to work on appropriate strategies for emergency and post-war interventions. There is a need to know: what understanding they have of how family, community and structures in the wider society have been changed by conflict; how children see and value the institutions around them; what they feel are the major impacts of war on them and what they feel the future holds for them, their families and communities.

Little is really understood about what youth and children think about the social and economic impact of conflict. Involving them both as respondents and researchers in a study to examine what they, their families, their peers and their communities actually think, provides an immensely rich and exciting opportunity for learning and for the future evolution of programme responses to the needs of the group as a whole.

This piece of research is qualitative and exploratory in nature: it is not aiming to produce quantitative data or to test any particular hypothesis. The methodology is somewhat experimental and uses young people as researchers. Despite some limitations in the approach and methods used (see Chapter 5), there are some compelling and unexpected findings.

Initial discussions about the feasibility of the research were held with Don Bosco Homes, which has an extensive network of projects working with youth and children in the urban and semi urban-areas of Liberia³. Twenty-eight children and young people between the ages of thirteen and nineteen were involved initially. The majority were aged sixteen and over and have lived in cities most of their lives. The group of young people was extremely mixed in terms of their family back grounds and formal educational levels: most lived at home with family members, some with other people's families and a small number either lived in residential care, alone or with other children or young people. However, children from better off, Catholic and middle class families were over-represented in the group. Nearly all of them are involved with Don Bosco through some level of activity related to networking (school counsellors or members of community football teams among others) or as people attending Don Bosco projects or centres.

In a preliminary meeting of the group at the beginning of December 2000, the project was presented in accessible language, and their potential roles as researchers were discussed. Despite the fact that some of the young people have been involved in journalism or investigative community work, research done by children and youth was a new concept to all of them. In the preliminary meeting some expressed concerns about whether they could undertake the work or not. However, only one child actually dropped out of the process.

The preliminary meeting was followed the next week by a training weekend when methods and issues to be studied were discussed in detail; the young people carried out trial interviews and did a practical research exercise with real community groups. At the end of the weekend the team leading the training had identified a group of children who would not be able to do the full scale research work, but who would be able to interview their families for limited information and describe how war has affected them directly. A group of approximately twenty children and youth were identified to take the main piece of research forward, and a group of five others to do a limited version of the research.

Prior to the training weekend a number of potential topics of interest had been identified for the study. These were discussed with the young people during the weekend, topic areas were dropped, changed or merged depending on the priorities of the young people

and how they saw them linking to each other. At the end of the weekend the main areas of interest to the study were identified as:

- Family living arrangements and the children's own living arrangements.
- Who does what in the home and who controls whom.
- Household income, how it comes in and how it is used.
- What work people do and what other ways they have of getting money.
- How people see education and work.
- Issues of domestic violence.
- Issues of domestic and community/school sexual exploitation and violence.
- Free time activities and how they, and attitudes towards them, have changed.
- Children taking part in the family and community.

Cutting across all of the themes is the issue of how relationships in families, peer groups, the community and society have changed. Each young person was to select a group of interviewees representative of the people s/he lives with – the family, the peer group and the wider community. Each researcher was to give his or her supervisor a list of the people to be interviewed. With the supervisor the child or young person was to run through which types of questions and topic areas would be addressed with each of the people on the list and how. By conducting structured, semi-structured and informal interviews they were to attempt to identify changes between the pre-war situation in Liberia and the current one. The aim was to try to measure how people believe things actually were, how they have changed and how people perceive the impact of those changes. They were also to try and see how those changes came about. Check-lists were created to help the children and young people with their interviews. For those with good literacy skills, interview forms and copybooks were available to record the outcomes directly. Some of the young people tape recorded interviews and listened to them afterward to record the key points.

Group meetings were held with the young researchers in early February 2001 to capture the essence of what they were finding and to ensure the work was on track. Extensive notes were taken by the adult facilitators on the views and opinions expressed by the 27 young people involved in the process at both the training weekend and the meetings in February. A first analysis of collected interview notes and notes gathered by the supervising adults throughout the process was drawn up into a set of comments reflecting what had been said. A focus group of four youths and one facilitator was formed to review and verify the analysis in May 2001. The focus group met for a long weekend. This provided an opportunity to review what had been written to date and comment on factual detail and analysis. Importantly the weekend provided the young

people with an opportunity to disagree with or modify what had been written. The focus group also discussed how they would like the study to be presented.

Some 120 written and tape-recorded interviews and discussions were submitted to supervisors by the young researchers; these were typed up and analysed. Detailed notes reflecting over 40 hours of discussions⁴ with the young people were also written up. The discussions with the young people reflect their analysis of the situation before, during and after the war and changes that have come about. The summary of notes taken from the discussions is a rich but subjective analysis of much discussion and debate. Written and tape-recorded interviews do not capture much analysis of how change came about: this probably reflects the fact that during the training of the interviewers they were encouraged to reflect on their own perceptions of the impact of the war, and that their own categories have been used extensively as a framework for their own interviews. Respondents were therefore asked to express their views on specific issues rather than being encouraged to identify, in an open-ended manner, what they themselves saw as the main effects of the war. However, despite this tendency towards convergence, some issues emerge other than those which had been already identified by the researchers.

In reality the process was difficult to implement; many of the constraints and challenges that contributed to the difficulties are discussed in Chapter 5. Other problems included time and staffing constraints, a relative lack of interest among the young researchers once the limelight of training weekends was off and poor organisation early on in the process. Despite the constraints the research has provided a mass of invaluable information and an agreed analysis: it also provided all involved with new insights and new skills.

3. Analysis of the Main Findings

This long chapter provides an analysis of the findings of the research. Direct quotes from the young people involved and from the interviews they carried out are presented either in italics or in inverted commas. Sometimes the “Liberian English” used has been modified to make understanding easier.

Underpinning the many changes identified by the young people is an alteration in power structures in personal, family and community relationships. This change, the young people say, is reflected at the national level too. The change has been brought about by an increasing emphasis on who has money and who has connections with those who have money, and on the power associated with the war and the government. The young people define the words “respect” and “power” as meaning the same as “having money”. According to the young people, money was always important in Liberia. However, now it has almost totally replaced other criteria for who is respected and who is not, such as professional qualifications, trust, age and kinship⁵.

Throughout the study the young researchers struggled with the very ambiguous nature of their environment. Many talked as if they actually inhabit two realities at once. On the one hand the “old” pre-war world that was “real” and had a clearly defined social and moral structure and, on the other, the “new” material world in which power and social relationships have been largely commercialised and brutalised. While much of what happens in the new environment is described as “pretend” and “not correct” the young people involved in the research suggest that they are able to operate within it and that there are elements of this new environment that they prefer to the old. The commercialisation of relationships in Liberia is starkly highlighted throughout the document. It is also interesting that some themes one would expect to emerge either do not emerge at all, or do not appear to be particularly significant. This is discussed in Chapter 4.

3.1 Perceptions of Pre- and Post-War Liberia

Most of the young people do not remember the pre-war period or have only vague memories of playing and eating. Some have memories of school being very strict, though those old enough to remember were only just entering the school system at that time.

Initially most of the young people present a clear picture of what the situation was like before the war in “normal times”. This is obviously informed by adults and is essentially a presentation of what was available materially; food, better housing and

more things e.g. clothes and television. The pre-war situation is romanticised; most of the young people say that there were jobs for everyone who wanted them. All of them say that young people could go to school and good schools were available and with educational qualifications good jobs were easy to come by. Pre-war was a time when children had respect for adults and were controlled by them. Most of the young people present pre-war as a time when young people did not have to work as hard as they do today and did not have to do things to earn money.

At first, when the young people describe post-war Liberia it is represented as the opposite to the pre-war situation described above, i.e. few material possessions, no jobs, no access to good education and no adult control over children. The young people have a very clear understanding of how things “should be” and what the “right” way of doing things is, and this largely reflects perceptions of the pre-war situation in Liberia. As stated, initial comments about the impact of war present it negatively, the opposite to what was “normal” and available before the war. However, when the young people talk in more depth about how they see the pre-war situation and the changes that occurred for them, a different picture emerges. Many of the young people raise points that suggest that the war had brought about changes that benefit them, and at times their families and communities.

There were examples of changes brought about by the war that the young people initially said were negative, but when they were discussed the changes were not judged negatively or condemned. An example of this is the widespread practice among schoolgirls of exchanging sexual favours for examinations grades and/or small amounts of money with their teachers. While the young people feel that this is something that represents “wrongful behaviour” many feel it is not bad because it helps with grades which in turn helps with getting through school quickly, getting the required certificates and having money for clothes and other things⁶. This example highlights the complexity of the situation for many young people. They understand the tensions between the old and new value systems, but in an environment where everything, including security, is extremely fragile young people chose to behave pragmatically as a survival mechanism rather than because they have made a moral choice which opposes the old value system.

Similarly the loss of control by adults over children is initially stated as a negative outcome of the war by most of the young people and their respondents. However, in this case, none of the children and young people involved in the research feels that the reduction of adult control in their own lives is a bad thing, and not one of the young people asked would exchange more adult control over young people for a return to the pre-war situation.

3.2 Different Perspectives

It is clear that young people and adults view the impact of war differently and that smaller children have a different perspective to either group. While the different issues of concern expressed by young people and adults are probably reflected in almost any rapidly changing society, the outcomes of the research suggests that extremely quick changes have taken place in Liberia. Adults in particular have a difficult time understanding or accepting them while young people seem more able to understand the changes and span the gap between the perceived pre-war situation and that of today.

Clearly all the young people are acutely aware of the death toll and damage the war has done to their society and the negative impact it has had on their families and communities in general. But death and destruction do not dominate the youths' discussion or description of war. Younger children in particular have no pre-war memories with which to make comparisons and often do not remember those who died. Despite the early listing of death and destruction as bad things about war the young people rarely come back to these subjects in their discussions or interviews. Adults are clearly more concerned with the death toll and the physical and material damage done by war. However, their immediate concerns are earning money, survival and the education of their children.

There is a widely felt concern among adults that young people and children are out of control; this reflects the newly found economic power of children and youth in the family and in the community. Children being "loose"⁷ and failing to show respect are commonly recurring themes in what adults say during the research.

Older adults, especially Elders⁸ think that children taking power is an affront to social order, but it is also suggested that some younger Elders do not think this way. Some of the young people claim that some younger adults in society are jealous of the position of children as they think that they were recently young but did not have the freedom children have now.

While adults are very concerned that children having money is the same as disrespect, this is not what children think. During discussions several young people described adults as "selfish" and "wrong". Economic change has brought about power changes in the family, children now have "expression" in the family, and it is this that parents do not like, they claim. There is a clear feeling that all the children involved as researchers prefer the current power structure to what existed before and that this is a good outcome of the war.

The older children are concerned that small children do not understand what happened during the war and therefore do not know the negative consequences. This leads the smaller children to think that the security forces and the bad habits they see are “fine” and to want to copy them:

Small children say things are good now, they do not know anything else. Younger children admire and copy whatever they see around them.

By and large older children and youth do not see younger children as having their own perspective and this is reflected in how few interviews were carried out with younger children during the research.

Most of the young people involved with the study see older people as being responsible for changes that have occurred in the behaviour of younger people and children. They have set bad examples and these examples are what “after-war children” have copied. After all “before-war children”⁹ were respectful and controlled. Adults interviewed during the research, on the other hand, see the behaviour of children who fought in the war as an example of how out of control children are and how they are at least partly responsible for changes in behaviour that have occurred.

3.3 Understanding the Terms “Respect” and “Power” and Changes that have Taken Place

The terms “respect”, “show respect” and “power” are used throughout the research and define much of how the researchers and their respondents see relationships within the family, the community, peer groups and society. The young researchers were asked to define what the terms mean to them. Showing respect is defined as: to hang around, to do things for someone free, do what you are told by them, create impression you like them, say nice things to them, show blind loyalty. There seems to be a qualitative difference in the terms “respect” and “real respect”. The young people involved in the research put an emphasis on “real respect” to talk about people who do well for others or who have moral authority in the community as opposed to simple power.

In the past community relationships were defined by trust, even if the powerful person had no money there was trust and authority, and powerful people were those like professionals, company workers, people with respectable government jobs and some traditional leaders in the community. Now power is with those who have money. Business people, the young people say, are now the most important, along with people in the government who were involved in the war in some way. Before the war older people had power in the community, professionals including teachers were respected:

“Children used to feel proud and fight over the honour to go to the teacher’s house on Saturday and work for them free”.

Some children say there is no need to give adults respect because they (children) now have money. Generally young people respect those who “cater to them” (give them what they want/need). The young researchers say they respect people who have money more than other people. Half of the young researchers say they have paid teachers for school grades; there is no respect for teachers and none for government officials who do not get paid. One girl describes a vicious circle: children do not respect adults in general because of the bad things they do. But children are looking at what they can get, so parents and adults do not respect children because they use their power against them. If an adult helps a child he/she will have the child’s respect. Since the war, children expect power and respect, including from adults. But what she seems to imply is that what the children she is describing actually crave is a real respect for authority and not simple empty gestures of showing respect.

Young people say that now power is money and material things. If you have access to a car, a radio and particularly a cell phone you have power. If you can borrow a cell phone you also have power. If you have clothes that you can afford to lend to your friends you have power over them because you can ask for your clothes back. They will respect you. When asked who has power, they indicate that security forces have power because they have money and can extort it or steal it. A boy of seventeen describes a Commanding Officer of the Special Officers Division of the police as “high government authority”, reflecting his economic power in the area. NGO workers and market people (sellers) are described as having the upper hand because they have money and access to status symbols, and people are jealous of them and gossip about them.

However, whether someone with money has “real respect” depends on how they act with their money. Those who have money and move away from their old friends and act differently will make people gossip about them and spread rumours. Some people, when they get money, stay and then treat their friends like slaves and use them. The young people describe how “people often feel satisfied when these people lose their money. Those who stay and act good (share some of their money) will be liked”.

There is some debate among the young researchers about the security forces. One boy, when challenged by another young researcher about whom he respects replies “People who have power to harm me”. Some believe that although people “show respect” for the security forces, no-one has “real respect” for them because of the bad things they do. It is no longer their authority which commands “real respect”. Others thought that young children respect them because they do not know differently and want to be like them,

and some adults and young people only see their money and power so respect them for that.

There have been some changes that are considered positive by all. Raised in two interviews and by a number of the researchers were the changed status of Americo-Liberians (Congos). The mass exodus of members of the Americo-Liberian population and the flight of their capital during the war may well partially explain this. However, it is clearly agreed that social barriers have broken down. Young people say that they do not need the patronage of a Congo¹⁰ for education and some good jobs in the security forces and NGOs have opened up to non-Congos. A non-Congo boy could go out with a Congo girl now without being afraid that her father would kill him, one boy stated.

Powerlessness is a recurring theme in the research. The young people and their respondents talk about it in terms of family (the status of men) and in communities. Despite the fact that Americo-Liberians no longer have the hold over society they had before, many people say that everything still depends on your connections and contacts and who you know in Liberia. One girl says:

What hope is there for poor people: none without contacts. They do small jobs and try to get by even if they have degrees it is meaningless. You can sell Chiclets (chewing gum) with a degree. Poor people are lucky if they have gardens or can sell, but no free Sundays again (every moment is taken up working) they have to feed their selves. Poor people have to have contacts, even if you are going to find people to help you make money through crime you have to know someone. Crime pays better than hustling.

3.4 Changes in Family Roles, Dynamics and Decision Making

Very clear patterns emerge in the changes that have taken place in families living in urban areas in Liberia. Many of the young researchers speculate that the patterns of change may not be as clear-cut in rural areas where traditional lifestyles have been less affected by conflict. One of the most interesting issues to emerge from the interviews is the way in which changes in family income and employment opportunities have affected the functioning of families. This is manifested in the changing roles played in the family and the way adults and children relate to each other.

Families before the war are generally described as “united”, “together” and “trained”: “Before the war, family used to be united because of more income”¹¹. The father figure was the head of the household and perceived as the main breadwinner. The general description is of families in which women and children “respected” and “obeyed” the head of the household and children played no role in family decision-making. The

changing role and authority of the father, resulting from the war, comes across very strongly in the study. Many adult respondents refer to the loss of authority and status which results from adult male unemployment: “When the woman is working and the man is not working he will not be able to make decisions for the woman because he will be afraid”: “Men without jobs have less power.... Men feel ashamed because men are not working”: “Men have lost their pride as husband because of no job. Now men feel ashamed because first of all money is power and if men can no longer provide, he has limited power”. One man illustrates the psychological effect of the loss of this role in very moving terms:

The war has also actually made me to be like a little child in the home. I am without job, waiting until my wife can come from selling. It makes me to feel as though I am the only one the war came for.

Another man says he has turned into his daughter’s “watchman” as she has the sole financial responsibility in the family, earning money through prostitution. He can only stand by and watch and protect her from violent clients.

There are several references to women leaving men because they were no longer able to cater to the family or were using scarce money irresponsibly. Many of the young researchers and people interviewed attribute increases in the abuse of alcohol and domestic violence to the “shame” and “frustration” experienced by men who have lost their authority and status. One youth even suggests that increased domestic violence has nothing to do with the violence people saw in the war but the frustration of being powerless. Women in general seem to be occupied in petty trading and selling, while many interviews suggest that men do not find alternative work. Women who had formal sector jobs before the war are often now engaged in the informal sector, and where women work it is often their income that is used to feed the family.

The increasing independence of children and young people is another major recurring theme. Despite the widespread mention of poverty and shortage of money, young people have actually acquired a greater measure of financial independence. One way or another young people are either obliged or feel the need to find ways of getting money for themselves or for their families. Some children have become key income earners in families: “The war made children to become bread-winners”; “Now it is his children who bring in money”.

Children and young people are involved in many activities to get money. Selling small items and doing small services for others are important means of income. But there are also many references to children and young people selling sex. Some young people indicate it is increasingly common for families to “send” older children out to sell sex or

to “turn a blind eye”: “Families do not ask where money comes from any more when children bring it home”. One girl described how families selling sex for survival are realistic, often they think the man might marry the daughter and there will be more money in the future.

Young people describe how the income of children and young people is used: “Everyone for themselves, dictated by who earns and brings money in to the home”: “Everyone decides how to spend their own money”: “Families expect children to buy their own things”: “Some accept money from their children though they prefer that kids find their own money for extras for themselves”.

Altered family income patterns have changed the nature of power within the family, and decision-making processes. The focus group of young people defined who had power in the family before the war as dependent on several factors – age, money, gender, marital status (for women): children’s power was restricted. Now status depends only on money and money equals power. Children are increasingly involved in decision-making in the family, as are women, and there are reported cases where adults are scared to make decisions without consulting children because their income is vital to family survival. The way in which some children assume family-head roles, even though the former family-head is in the home recurs as a theme in discussions. One youth says:

Before the war, children were not allowed in decision-making. Now they are the main decision makers. They make decisions because they are depended upon by their parents for money. If children have money they do feel more independent and adults have less authority.

It is interesting to note that adults usually perceive these changes negatively:

Before the war family living arrangements were fine, parents were the only people in charge but after the war parents and children are in charge of their selves.... The atmosphere of living is polluted for the family.

However, many young people are positive about their increased role in decision making:

Some of the good things that the war brought are: you find children thinking big and you find them making good decision for themselves and their family.

Some of the changes now is that you see children not obeying their parent. Parent allow children to take part in family decisions because they are the future leaders for tomorrow and also the children have the right to say Mama or Papa we want to discuss with you people because some of the things you people are doing are wrong.

One boy commented that many children still do not feel they are given enough authority:

Even with economic power some children see that they are limited and denied and they don't like that or think they should be denied as they are now powerful.

This clearly allows us to see that some children and young people expect money to confer authority on them and not just power.

Economic changes have impacted on the relationship between adults and children. Before the war, parents “controlled” children. In “trained” homes, children had “respect and fear” for their parents. Parents were reported as spending a lot of time advising and talking to their children. However, “Now you hardly find children sitting with their parents”, “Father hardly sit and talk with family”. This is also reflected in the way in which children and young people describe changes in how leisure and free time is spent (see section 4.9 below). Both adults and youth refer to the fact that young people and children respect their parents less as a result of the war and this leads to a loss of parental authority (described usually as control): “These days children do not listen to parents any more”: “Their parents do not have control over them”: “I think the impact of war has spoilt our children because all of them want to have their own way”: “Now the children are very rude”.

One boy describes how parental guidance is not there any longer; children are no longer “under” adults:

Parents are busy and don't have time for kids this has led them to being free and they want to carry on being free. In the home if children feel controlled they do not like it anymore. This is a major impact of the war.

However, the ambiguity many of the young people feel is highlighted by another youth who feels that despite young people thinking adults are not in control, they want them to be: “Children were born in war, their eyes opened in war and they will do bad things because they have seen that, only those with strong parents who can advise will be alright (in the future)”.

Another boy, with a different point of view, describes how the war exposed plenty of people to new experiences, and as a result children are now able to talk to adults: before they would keep things “in their throats” (to themselves) but now they talk to their friends and to parents if something is really bothering them or if their parents “do bad” to them. Before he was ashamed to talk to his father, now he can talk to him when he does something bad, he can “Bring other people around to hear it and can talk straight”. He can also “Sit with my father and share a bowl of food with him”.

During discussion most young people link the changes with financial independence within the family:

Before (the war) the children were obedient because they had no idea of earning money, they were dependent, now they have more money than their parent so as the result they disobey.

It was reported that even within families that are generally better off after the war, children are now involved in decision making if they bring in money.

Interestingly few of the young people involved in the research indicate that remittances from the United States have much important to family incomes in general. However, in discussion of their individual circumstances several of them indicate that their parents or carers receive remittances and that these are very important both in terms of cash money coming into the home and in defining how decisions are made. In one boy’s family, five male adults living in the household refuse to work because they want to do office or “paperwork” and not manual work. They are only able to do this because of income from the United States. Another boy describes how his sister in the United States is sending for one of her younger brothers (a teenager of 16) to go and live with her to become the day-carer for her child. Despite the fact that the boy did not want to go he felt obliged to as his sister’s remittances from the USA are important to the family in Liberia and he did not want to jeopardise that income by saying no.

3.5 The Community

As stated, the children and youth involved in the research believe that, in the past, community relationships were defined by trust and real respect for authority, but that now power is with those who have money.

When several of the children involved in the research were asked to think of words to describe Liberia as it is today, a word that was repeated often was “pretend”. One young person describes how people are “acting” all the time. There is a sense of powerlessness

to change the way that society and communities work and so people “act” as if things are normal in the hope that this will hold things together:

I go to school in case things become normal and I could be someone.

The understanding of what is real or should be, exists side by side with an understanding that much of what they see around them is not real: that people are merely acting as if things are real is something that the young people can describe and operate with.

While not all the young researchers feel as pessimistic about their communities, many of the children feel that their communities are very fragile. Things appear to be happening but they are not really. Family, community, schools, churches and security forces are structures that look “real” but are not working, and “real respect” for social institutions has collapsed. One of the adults supervising the research said “Children feel everything has become a negotiation and is negotiable”. One of the young people involved says that before the war corruption was for rich people, now it is at all levels of the community.

While going to school has important status in Liberia we see below that schooling has for many become a “business”. Involvement with a church is very important in Liberia. However, the youth feel that churches are exploiting people too:

All the pastors just want money and power. People know that, but people have to go to church otherwise people will talk about them.

Even sport is seen as being corrupt: “People can easily find someone to bribe and pay onto a (football) team”: if you don’t have money talent is not important – “what is important is money and bribery”.

The young researchers believe that communities, particularly areas where there is a lot of crime, “ghettos” are run by security personnel, the very forces who should be protecting people from “wrongful behaviour”. The researchers think that younger children who do not remember before the war see the security forces as they are now and think that is good. They do bad things in communities, but they have uniforms, guns and money-power so children want to be like them. One youth says “Children do not see that soldiers are mortals, that they should do ordinary things like pay taxi fares, the children think it is crazy they should be asked to”.

Another common feature of family and community life described by a number of the young researchers is living with fear. This affects how people behave on an everyday basis:

They are always afraid, but just have to joke and make it go from your heart to cope with it. They (children and young people) are born with it and raised in it.

Adults fear for their children. They fear for the lack of education for their children, corruption and what it does. They live with fear; they knew what it was like before fear.

Everyone is scared of the government and security forces and powerless to change it. If there was fair elections next year the president would not win, but who knows if he says he will go back to war then they will vote for him.

While many pessimistic opinions are expressed, there are positive examples where even the most fragile of communities have tried, and in some instances succeeded, in taking a lead in matters of child protection, striving to make their environments better and safer places for children¹².

The young people involved in the research believe that the changes that have taken place in urban communities in Liberia have not taken place at the same speed in rural communities. In communities “in the interior” children are more controlled by their parents, traditional community leaders are more respected, and there is less corruption.

3.6 Violence, Crime, Sexual Violence and the Law

In the training workshops for the young interviewers, one of the themes which they identified as resulting from the war was a group of issues under the general title of “wrongful behaviour”: this is a set of issues which many of them pursued in their interviewing. A number of distinct, but overlapping, issues emerge.

First, a recurring theme is that of increasing violence within the family. Many of the young people state that sexual and physical violence existed before the war, and while there is some disagreement among interviewees and young people to what extent war has exacerbated domestic violence, there is agreement that war has increased it. Violence on the part of men towards their wives is frequently mentioned in the interviews. Violence of parents towards children is also mentioned frequently. Some see this as a consequence of disobedience, but also as a result of the lack of parental support that some young people experience. The following quotation from an adult illustrates how this becomes a vicious circle:

If the war hadn't come violence against women and children was not going to be..... Children have been motivated by their parents to do wrong. The children feel that their parents don't have the hand to support them. For this reason parents are far from their children.

Second, sexual violence in the family and in the wider community is also a recurring theme:

Sexual violence is common because during the war many persons were raped and those who carried out those activities during the war are still lingering in the communities.

There is a feeling that this violence is self-perpetuating: “Children feel bad about domestic violence – on children and on women – but they see it and they will copy it”. Some respondents referred to extreme forms of violence towards children:

Violence in the community are rape and killing of younger children. Some men are raping smallest girls in their community.

Third, some of those interviewed refer to what appears to be random community violence and inappropriate behaviour: “There are lots of violence in the community such as children throwing rock over people’s houses and toileting around people’s houses” and “Wrongful behaviour is occurring constantly where mothers are driven out of the house and children stealing, fighting and taking drugs outside of their homes”.

The high incidence of armed robbery in communities is also worrying to the young researchers and their respondents. Some link the emerging patterns of violence and other “wrongful behaviour” with the prevailing level of unemployment and poverty and the effects of this on family and community dynamics. One young researcher says: “I think that the violence is caused mainly by mass poverty. The man is not in the position to cater to the woman, for this reason the woman is not always pleased because she doesn’t have the things her friends have”. A similar view is expressed by an adult interviewee: “Sexual and community violence, they were less before the war because people were working and could get their needs. It became great after the war because most people are not working, thus they cannot get their needs and children’s needs. Therefore, to get their needs and wants, people violate or agree to get violated for money”.

Some young people see violence as a part of the complex cycle of changes resulting from the war:

Now violence in the community brought about by gossip and now sexual violence brought about because of poverty, disobedience and the street life and also lack of self control..... "After-war" children have more money because they steal, arm rob and they sell themselves for money.

In response to the increase of violence there seems to be very little action taken. Young people describe this in various ways: "Before there were no community violence because community leader were taking care of the community"; "Her community doesn't seem to care"; "People are not together" and "People feel bad about these thing but they can't say anything because they can't help them to stop doing it". The picture, then, is of a generalised breakdown in family and community values, with a widespread sense of these changed values being wrong, but people feeling powerless to change the situation. Individuals and communities do not trust the security forces or police to resolve violence or crime in the community. This is in contrast to the pre-war situation: "Before the war there were lot of good police and security so things were coming on good in the community". Many of the young people involved in the research are aware that the security forces and police did bad things during the war and therefore they do not trust them now.

The law, one youth explains, does not work for poor people, or anyone really in Liberia. Law works for rich people who can pay their way out of it. If law enforcers are the ones doing bad things – "The whole concept is upside down". Another boy stated: "Before if you killed someone it was a big case, important legal case, now you can kill someone and get carried to the police station and then pay your way out". A girl stated a case of "Little girls who got taken away on a ship by people who now claim they are dead and no one knows what (really) happened because the traffickers are rich".

Some young people make comments about communities taking the law into their own hands, but often they say punishments are harsh and do not give time to really see if the person is guilty or not. One group of young researchers discusses how although the power of traditional community leaders has been eroded by the changes the war has brought about, communities who cannot access justice through the police and courts have turned to traditional sorcerers for help. Sorcerers are said to have the means of divining who has committed a crime or offence and can often offer a means of punishment/retribution through curses or direct action. However, even sorcerers are expensive and not always accessible to poor people.

3.7 Relationships, Sex and Prostitution

During discussions about relationships most of the young people involved in the research thought that families are more now liberal and that this is good. Some describe

how, before the war, parents expected their children to be of a certain age or out of high school before they could bring a boyfriend or girlfriend home. This has changed, partly, they think, because times are changing but also in part because “war gave people exposure”. War, the youth claim, has also meant that barriers which made relationships between children and young people from the “Congo” group and non Americo-Liberian ethnic groups a taboo have broken down to some extent.

However, most of the young people were worried about what defines their relationships. One adult interviewed said: “Some children make love for money not to their equal or to their peer”. Most of the young people believe that the factor that most defines relationships is money:

The majority of children are just loving to adults for money. They don't think about the future of the relationship, just today living.

It is impossible to find a boy who will be faithful and will like you for who you are. I sometimes think I will marry but I do not know how because of this.

Most boys and girls are full of it and would leave their boyfriend or girlfriend for someone with more money.

One male youth says “Some girls don't want to marry legally, they don't want to let men have power over them”. This is worrying for him, as he does not feel a man could tolerate a woman having power within the family, and these attitudes may well be borne out by many of the apparent changes in the status of men and their responses to those changes (see discussion in 3.4 above).

Some young people mention that older people are often shocked to hear younger people talk about sex, relationships, sexual violence and prostitution. Sometimes things were covered up before and it is only if older and younger people can talk that the issues will be addressed. One girl suggests that because there had been a lot of talk about teachers having sex with students in Catholic schools, resulting in some teachers being fired, there is now less of it happening. Another says now that it has become “A big issue in Monrovia and everyone is talking about it child prostitution is getting a bit restricted and less. But it is more a question for poor people so it will not go away”.

There is still a lot of ambiguity about children having sex for favours or selling sex for money. While many say it falls into the category of “wrongful behaviour”, few would argue against it as a means of getting things. Several of the girls involved in the research feel it is not a bad thing under the circumstances because the girls with money and

clothes have more independence and more respect. “Girl 6” in the case studies which appear as an appendix is an example of a girl who made money from prostitution. Many young people even cite parents who send their older children out to prostitute:

Some girls give money to their parents from the prostitution.

These families are even seen as pragmatic, as in some cases the older man may marry the daughter and then there will be more money in the family. Others say that children do not just prostitute themselves out of necessity: “Children are so anxious for money so they copy older children who are prostituting. Attitudes at school are they want the grades, want results not the work so it is easier to have sex than study”.... “Other children do it because of the need for fashion accessories. They sometimes get cash sometimes get things or favours”. One boy laments:

Boys are jealous of girls because they can get things from teachers by selling themselves and bribing, boys can't. Girls more often have money than boys, boys have to do work to get money, girls can beg or sell sex.

As discussed in the section on education below the young people involved in the research find it hard to define when adults’ use of children for sex in return for cash or favours is “exploitative” or an abuse of their rights. This is particularly interesting, or worrying, as most of the young people have been exposed to child rights ideas and principles and several of them are responsible as protectors of children’s rights in their communities or schools.

3.8 Changes in Education

One of the major areas of concern to the children and young people in the research group is education. Many report that fewer children are in school because of high school costs, increased poverty and the need for children to work and contribute to the household. It is clear that everyone believes that the quality of teaching has become worse since the war. Few teachers have proper qualifications and they are very badly paid. Teachers in state-run schools often go for months without pay (see “Girl 6” in the Appendix) and even those working in private and church schools are badly paid. Many teachers have several jobs. Some attribute poor teaching to the fact that young people do not give teachers respect. Schools were described variously as “a market”, “a street”, “a kitchen” because children go to school to talk and meet friends but not to learn.

Attitudes to education itself have changed. Most respondents and young researchers believe that the quality of education, teaching and learning itself was higher before the war. Children and young people were motivated to learn. The change can be sum-

marised by the expression used to describe many people's attitude to education in post-war Liberia: "Let's go graduate" – meaning schooling only has importance in terms of a high school graduation certificate. It would seem few place any real value on education, which does not, of itself, lead to improved job opportunities later on. One youth states:

Now education means nothing and we are going to school just for the name and to graduate, but not to learn. Before, school was interesting because we were going to build the future.

Several of the young researchers suggested that the changes in attitude could be blamed, in part, on social changes brought about by the war. Children without education achieved status during the war (e.g. child fighters and those who earned a lot of money):

Security forces don't have education but have status, now children see this as attractive. Children without education can earn and this is better than the appreciation of education for the sake of learning.

Many high up people now have got there without education – through guns. They just see sending their children to school as respectable; they pay for their children to go to school for the paper not the learning. Children have seen that power/money does not need education and so they don't see the point.

Most of the young people and respondents say that everyone knows education is important for the future, but they are only looking at the short term. One boy described the vicious circle in education saying that as the status of schools have gone down, people adapt to falling standards, and people do not want to study for something that is not good, they just want to graduate. Other young researchers say that most parents do value the idea of education, but that it is no longer clear to them if education means learning or just gaining a graduation qualification, particularly as patronage is now more important than education. Several of the young researchers and the adults involved in the research also speculate that going to school is part of a wider attempt by communities to say that things work and are "normal". One young man describes how things that appear to be "real" are structures that do not work:

People do things for the sake of it. They put uniforms on to go to school but it is all show..... Few value education, they go to school because that is what you do if you are a respectable person, but not because of what it means.

Others see school as playing an important social role in children and young people's lives, even if education has less value:

Schools are important to kids because of other things, recreation, school football teams and break time hanging out... Often children go to school because it is good to be part of society not really to learn.

As with other aspects of life in post-war Liberia education has been commercialised. A large number of young researchers and interviewees refer to the practice of teachers taking bribes in return for good grades and graduation to the next school year. Many others refer to payments to teachers in terms of sexual favours by young students:

Before school was a decent place. Now school is not. Now education means business because there are lots of bribing or bribery in school. Before education means skill because in there we go to build our minds, character and develop our country. Yes, school is a business because in there students can give teachers money just for free grades.

But now teacher are not teaching the right lesson for this reason girls are loving for grades while some boys are buying grades.

Within the group of young researchers ten were asked if they had ever bribed a teacher for a grade. There was some confusion among some of them as to whether buying a teacher lunch and giving money for beer was a bribe. When the group decided to define this as a bribe everyone in the group said they had. One boy described how he knows he is secure because he is a friend of the School Principal (and buys him things); this patronage allows him to pass exams and make grades.

Girls among the researchers who attend state run schools estimate that about 30% of their female classmates have had sex with a teacher for grades, small money or other favours. Again, during discussions there was some disagreement among groups as to whether this was something negative. As a strategy to get grades it is not seen as a bad thing. During one of the discussions the same girls were asked if teachers were abusing children's rights by having sex with them for grades. Some thought that if the girl was below ten years of age there was an abuse, others thought perhaps if the girl was below fourteen, but few thought it could generally be described as an abuse of power.

School and education are widely referred to as "business" in interviews. However this is not just because teachers take bribes and sexual favours. Descriptions of how extra-curricula activities have also become income earners for the school were given. One girl describes how in most schools money-making extra-curricula activities like beauty contests happened once a semester, now they are almost weekly and children are forced to pay for them. Children have to pay towards sports and extra events and that is hard on

them. The whole school closes for the activity and there is no teaching done. If there is a sports game the teachers use that as a reason to close the school also.

Some children themselves view going to school as a good business opportunity. Many children sell food items during recess and earn money for doing errands. One of the young researchers described the importance of school in his daily coping strategies: he goes to school and “I rally with my men on campus for food and money” – he gets his friends together they put money into a kitty which he takes care of and they buy food to eat in the school day. He shares it out and keeps more than his share for himself. Sometimes his school friends give him five dollars (approximately US\$ 0.10c) – see Boy 1 in the appendix.

3.9 Changes in Recreation and Leisure

It is clear from the interviews that the pattern of young people’s leisure-time pursuits has changed since the war in Liberia. The changes are obviously linked with the increased sense of freedom, which young people have achieved, their greater financial independence, and the changes in the availability of particular types of facility. It also reflects the fact that, for some of them, work (especially within the informal sector) may sometimes have to take precedence over leisure-time pursuits: “Now most of the free time is spent hustling for daily needs. Before the war you could relax during your free time, now you have to work”: “Now, the children most of them spend the free time in business area”.

The nature of leisure-time activities has also changed. In general there seems to have been a trend away from traditionally prescribed activities for children toward the greater involvement, especially of adolescents, in more adult pursuits. Several young people commented on the loss of separate entertainment facilities for children (though not stated this probably includes ice cream centres, play grounds, and cinemas showing children’s films: these would have had more impact on the children and youth from better off families). As a consequence they tend to become more involved with what would have been regarded as adult activities. Adults and youth both appear to view these trends negatively, as the following quotations demonstrate: “I think the children don’t have much entertainment centre exclusively for them, so they mingle with the adults and copy what they see and hear”: “Now children spend their free time walking idly in the community”: “Now free time is spent in the night clubs, beaches and ghettoes, while smoking and drinking”.

Before the war, free time tended to centre on the family: “Before the war children used to spend their free time by going out with their parents, going to spend weekends with their friends and what have you”. Since the war, children have tended to spend time

away from the family, partly because many young people are also given greater freedom of movement:

Before he spent his free time studying and his mother did not allow him to go anywhere, he only stay at home and do his work, but now he decided how and where to spent it.

Spending increased amounts of free time in the street (also the location of much of children's and young people's working life) is sometimes perceived negatively:

The impact of war has caused wrongful behaviour plenty, for example, children all in the street doing bad things.

For some young people, however, the conditions in post-war Liberia have led some parents to restrict the leisure-time activities of their children, as the following quotation shows:

There is no free time now because parents cannot allow us to go anywhere because wrong thing are going on e.g. stealing and killing.

Again, the views expressed by young people which suggest they feel free time is now spent negatively are sometimes at odds with the stated preference of the young researchers: many children and young people can take more active decision-making roles, are not restricted by adults and have independence from traditional family structures.

3.10 Hopes and the Future

Many of the young researchers talk about the future and their aspirations as if they were two totally different things. Many of those who have connections in the United States dream of leaving Liberia or of becoming professionals within their own country. Few who stated a preference for future careers had realistic ambitions (see "boy 3" in the appendix). One young man of nineteen, currently in the 5th grade of primary school, said he either wanted to be a bank manager or a footballer and that he would try for both; but when a friend laughed and pointed out that there were no banks in Liberia he shrugged his shoulders as if this were immaterial to his ambition! Another young person describes how he wants to be a good person, have work that will give him respect and people will come to him and ask for help. He wants "to have money to be a big person and do that". At the same time as having dreams about the future the young people are very pessimistic about the realities of their situation.

I sometimes imagine things will be fine, but I sometimes think negatively because things will not be hopeful – I just have to face it.

One girl who still believes in the value of education says it is the key to the future. But in her opinion there is no work:

Adults force young people to go to school but why, it does not mean anything, no jobs. You need four to five degrees to get work.

One boy feels that he should work but has “no good idea about the future because there is no work”. He wanted to be a pilot and his mother used to say she would help him to get what he wanted, but now she no longer talks about helping him. Another boy says “Now you can plan but all your plans are scattered”. School and a trade were his *People say they want big jobs, just because they have heard those job titles* plans, but now he does not know what school will bring. One of the young researchers describes what he thinks were the motivations of people with big ambitions:

People say they want big jobs, just because they have heard those job titles and they think they should have high hopes. They know what good jobs are and say that, anyway corruption can get you anything. Parents build the future on hope, it is very difficult to have a lot of hope but saying it is a formality.

Another young researcher describes how some children have hope:

The ones with more facilities (things) and these are ones that will separate themselves from you. Those who are trying to support themselves and the poor do not have much hope. No-one is thinking about the future, no one is thinking about hope. Rich people can have hope and think about tomorrow. But not everything lasts.

However, other young people describe the importance of having hope as a coping strategy:

Many parents have to hope, there is no way out now so the future hope has to keep them going. The present is now and easier if there is a future. People are keeping themselves for tomorrow.

Even though small people are powerless to change the system money is power and you need to be optimistic about getting it.

4. Themes that were Absent or Under-emphasised

A number of themes that might have been expected to emerge strongly in this study are actually conspicuous by their absence or at least by the lack of emphasis accorded to them. For example, the theme of personal loss does emerge in some of the interviews – loss of people within the circle of family and friends, loss of the home and so on: what is interesting is that, without exception, these appear to be accepted in a matter-of-fact way. The following reflections by the interviewer of an adult male in the community is a good illustration of this:

I think this person is hurt about the changes that have been taking place. I think that this man do not seem to care about the changes because he still have all he had before except for his wife and two of his boys.

This, of course, is the interviewer's perception, but other interviews tend to suggest a similar theme: "D feels very bad at times because he left his old neighbourhood. He also feels bad because of the death of his father". Similarly, separation that occurred during the war is stated in one interview but not elaborated upon either by the respondent or the interviewer, and does not come across as a significant issue: "The war brought separation between she and her family".

Migration was a significant feature of the war. Although family members now living overseas may provide an important source of income, the personal impact of the separation is not referred to at all. In the written and recorded interviews there is only one reference to the personal effects of loss and destruction, but even here a positive gloss is put on the situation: "The war was very bad on him by taking some of his people away and destroying lot of his properties but thank God for being alive".

The destruction of homes also emerges as an issue in one or two of the interviews: "The family were living in a modern house but now mud house". Again, however, the emphasis in the interview report is not on the loss of the home as such but on a changed atmosphere in the home and the fact that the children are now "in charge of themselves". Other losses mentioned in the interviews include the loss of the country's infrastructure – water, sanitation, medical facilities, electricity, roads, communications, schools and social services etc.: perhaps it is because these problems are experienced by almost everyone that they are not emphasised in the interviews.

Another surprising finding from the interviews is that there is only one reference to stress, trauma or the psychological impact of loss, frightening and dangerous events and displacement: “Because of the war children have too many stresses and strains and so they engage in negative activities”. But even in this case, the respondent is not referring to personal experience and the issue is not elaborated. The lack of reference to the psychological effects of the armed conflict is especially surprising in view of the very strong awareness, on the part of so many of the interviewees, of the psychological effects on the family of the loss of the father’s bread-winner role.

It would be inappropriate to draw any very firm conclusions from these largely absent themes: the structured nature of the interviews may have tended to minimise discussion outside of the pre-determined themes, but even allowing for this, the interviews tend to suggest that the priorities of those interviewed centre on changes in the family roles and dynamics, young people’s behaviour, poverty, employment issues, education, violence and leisure. Further research would be needed to ascertain whether other issues are seen as lower in the hierarchy of importance to adults and children and young people.

5. Reflections on Methodology and Research Process

The research was very ambitious from the outset. It attempts to capture the subjective analysis of children, young people and adults from their families and communities about the impact of war. This proved difficult for the young researchers in a society where people are rarely asked to analyse their environment and where people are often fearful of expressing their views. Problems for the young researchers included a wide level of mistrust about what they were going to do with the information they were asking for. This was particularly the case for children living in smaller towns outside Monrovia.

The educational levels of the participating young people were very different; some had almost completed high school, others were still in lower grades at school and a few had limited literacy skills. In Liberia, even those attending “good” schools had educational levels well below those one would see in comparative grades in other West African countries. Preparing the young people for the study exposed them to new ideas with very little time to work through those concepts. While all of the young people had strong opinions about things that affected them, they were not accustomed to being asked to analyse what is said or what they or other people think, nor had they considered how to examine thought processes and how they develop.

In Liberia there are often clear differences in how people speak to each other depending on the setting. Informal communication carried out in local languages (or Liberian English, increasingly the mother tongue in Liberia) is colourful, with humour based on using language to change meanings or mock each other or the situation. Formal interaction, on the other hand, is extremely stylised and language is littered with set and stock phrases.

Most young people do not learn to speak standard English until they attend school. In many cases young people learn Liberian English from parents who speak it as a second language and they learn standard English from adults (teachers) who only use it as a third means of communication. Although standard English is normally the means of communication used at workshops and other “important” events to give analysis, stylised language that has been picked up for “formal” events often disguises that very little is actually being said. An example from the training weekend highlights this; feeding back on a short interview one of the young people describes what she had heard:

The family had certain facilities available to them before the war, the circumstances of the war caused distress and brought about a situation where the family does not have the same facilities available and therefore they are suffering the consequences of the war.

The meaning of this was elaborated in subsequent discussion: the informant had come from a family where the young people did not have to work before the war, where food was plentiful and everyone was going to school. During the war they were displaced, walked through three counties to the Ivory Coast and stayed as refugees for some years. They then returned to Liberia to find their house occupied by internally displaced people (IDPs) and now live somewhere else. All the young people who go to school are also involved in domestic or other income generating work, the father does not work and the mother and young people are the main earners in the home.

In using Standard English it is often hard to move beyond stock formulas for communicating and to get people to sit down and analyse what is being said or heard, yet it is the formal means of communication. Much of the time, what is said in a formal setting is what the person speaking thinks is expected of him/her. Some of the less articulate children and young people were actually more open to the process (and able to see that what they were observing and hearing had different levels of meaning) than those who have sophisticated formal language skills. This was a striking and unexpected finding.

Although most of the young people had a great ability to repeat what they have heard, analytical listening skills were poor. The education system in Liberia relies heavily on rote learning, repetition and chanting. Grades are normally awarded for examinations and quizzes based on lists of closed questions and there are few opportunities for students to express ideas that have not been learnt for the express purpose of answering the questions set. Young people in the formal education system in Liberia are rarely exposed to analytical problem-solving educational methods and are rarely asked to express or analyse their own opinions.

In this context, preparing the young people to do the research for just one long weekend can only have had a small impact on building and strengthening the analytical skills they needed to view opinions expressed from different angles and to assess how people really perceive the impacts of war on themselves, their families and communities. With hindsight it is easy to see that much more preparation time was needed.

Many of the young people had difficulties understanding that the piece of research was aimed at capturing opinions and perspectives of others and that it would involve distancing themselves from their own pre-conceived ideas about what people would

think or say. This affected how they structured questions, what information they asked for in their questions and what they heard in their answers.

Many of the young researchers were quick to acknowledge that in Liberia few people would understand why they were being interviewed and that most would simply say what they thought was expected of them. Despite this, it was hard for the young people to see that there are qualitative differences between asking a question and getting an answer on the one hand, and successful interviewing on the other.

Working in small groups and through informal discussions the long weekend revealed that nearly all of the young people (particularly girls) felt the war had brought about positive changes in their lives. However, when asked to present their ideas formally or undertake a piece of practice research they shied away from addressing complex matters and reverted to discussing a stock set of “impact of war” issues:

- Availability of food
- Destruction of housing and absence of basic utilities
- Whether school fees could be paid and how
- People who were killed
- Whether young people are now “rude” and “loose” (as opposed to polite and controlled)

In the practical exercises the young people wanted to tackle difficult issues, but very few were successful during their interviewing practice of actually tackling what they said they would deal with in a qualitative way. During feedback from practice interviewing very few of the young people assessed that they had experienced difficulty getting people to talk to them and they felt that they had been successful in carrying out interviews. However, what they had heard reflected what they expected to hear (i.e. the list of issues above) and their own preconceived opinions about what they would hear.

Filtering information from the contents of an interview was a big challenge for the young people. Their listening skills allowed them to repeat what they had heard, or identify the key information given in direct response to a question posed. It was harder for them to listen to something and identify other information that might be important, or information that might give hints as to what people really think. The young people rarely expressed what they thought people feel or what they think they might be hearing. Because of this it was hard for some of them to develop a style of questioning that would draw out additional information or opinions.

Moreover, there was some ambiguity in the interview documentation given to some of the young people to provide them with ideas as to how interviews might be carried out.

The documentation encouraged them to reflect on the interview and draw conclusions from what was said; this may well account for the lack of clarity, in some cases, between the communication of the researchers' views and those of the interviewee.

As a result of some of the constraints mentioned here, the interviews that the children and young people submitted did not capture much analysis of how change came about, though there is consistency in what is said throughout the interviews. The analysis presented in this document therefore puts more emphasis on the forty hours of discussion held with young researchers during the research process than was anticipated initially.

6. Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this report, the research does not offer quantitative data about how the Liberian civil war has affected the socio-economic situation of children, their families and communities. Rather it tries to capture what a group of children and young people feel are the issues for themselves, their families and communities.

What emerges is the way in which the economic and employment considerations brought about by the conflict have resulted in major changes in family roles and responsibilities. The diminished role of the male head of household, the relative empowerment of women in the family and the stark increase in the economic and decision-making role of children in the family. Despite the overall increase in poverty, children and young people generally have more and not less access to money, and this in turn gives them greater autonomy and freedom.

The increasingly important (and often negative) role of money in family, peer and community relationships also comes across clearly in other aspects of life, the commercialisation of education and the selling of sex for cash or favours is a good example of this.

There has clearly been a breakdown in what were considered family and community values from the point of view of both young people and adults. The situation, as defined by the young researchers and their respondents, is indeed a depressing one. A defined sense of social fragility and the powerlessness of ordinary people emerged in terms of individuals or communities being able to change things. However, despite the fact that the young people involved in the research could see that many of the changes that had occurred were not how things “should be”, none would exchange the way things are now and revert to traditional roles of obedience and relative economic impotence for the benefits of pre-war “normality”, facilities and services. Indeed the young researchers feel that some changes that have occurred for them and their community have been positive.

As seen in the report, the young reporters feel that the war has accelerated the breakdown of the power of the Americo-Liberian group and opened things up for “indigenous” Liberians who do not have Americo-Liberian patrons. The changing economic situation and employment patterns have empowered women and girls in the family, though it would seem that this has often happened at the additional cost of domestic and sexual violence. While a number of adults and some of the male children and youth involved in the research did not feel positively about these changes, all the girls involved felt this empowerment was a positive outcome of the conflict.

Young people generally see their greater participation and responsibility positively:

He thinks that the war brought good and bad things to us. Some of the good things that the war brought to us now is that we notice that children are thinking big and making good decisions for their family.

Before children were not wise, they do not make decisions in the family. Now children learn that they have the right to decide in the family..... If children have money they have more independence..... Adults want for children to make decision in the family now.

A number of the young researchers also talk about the fact that war brought “exposure” to people and that this is not a bad thing either. “Exposure” in this case seems to mean having experiences that would not have been possible otherwise. In particular, some of the children commented on how rural people had been exposed to new things and this would have a good impact on children in the rural areas who still live within quite traditional family and community structures.

However, the real or perceived positive impacts of the changed situation brought about by the conflict do not overshadow the negative impacts discussed by the researchers and their interviewees. As one adult put it:

Things are zig-zag, nothing is going straight in this country now.

While the negative impacts of the conflict are clear, there is a need in the work of organisations like Don Bosco and Save the Children to try and understand what the underlying factors are in any community that allow it to hold together in the face of so much adversity. How are some (young) people able to adapt so effectively to the current environment without losing sight of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and continue to strive to make their communities better places for children and young people. This energy needs to be harnessed and capitalised on in future thinking.

The implications of the study for the work of organisations like Save the Children and Don Bosco are many. The young people who worked on or responded to the study have been empowered by the social and economic changes that the war brought about or accelerated. While the young people like this newly found power, they recognise that it has not really improved their situation. In part empowerment has led to a need to both accept and use the commercialisation of all aspects of relationships and reject “authority” that is not backed up with money power or connections with the war. This does not sit comfortably with many of the young people and it would seem that adult respondents are distinctly worried about the rapid changes that have come about.

Work which focuses on further empowering youth and children in their families, communities, schools etc. needs to be done in the context of understanding the gaps that have developed between the “adult” world and the world of young people. The young people involved in project work and the adults around them need to be actively engaged in confronting the way in which relationships have changed and why these changes may have come about to ensure that project work does not further exacerbate power imbalances for the worse. It may not be enough to ensure that adults understand why children and young people are involved in projects which empower them; it may be necessary to re-think strategies to involve both young people and adults in the work in a meaningful way.

The study does have some methodological limitations, as discussed in the previous chapter, and hence the findings should be regarded as tentative. However, the results are compelling. The study reveals clearly defined changes in social and economic relationships; the longer term implications of this are clear and worrying. Care was taken to provide the young researchers with a methodology and space for dialogue that did not strictly pre-define the issues for investigation, and to avoid imposing on them an assumption that the impacts of conflict would always be seen negatively: the result was the emergence of interesting and unexpected, though depressing, insights which have serious implications for how work with young people in conflict-affected situations is undertaken. There is a need to do similar research in other countries that have been affected by conflict over long periods of time to see if similar patterns of change are taking place, or to see if the changes reported in the Liberia study are context specific. Similar findings elsewhere would dictate the real need for dialogue on programming approaches to ensure wider discussion about social change and the wider involvement of both significant adults and young people in that process.

Indeed, it could be argued that a number of the changes the research highlights are changes that might also be seen in other rapidly changing societies, where poverty and urbanisation are characteristic – countries, for example, affected by strict structural adjustment fiscal policy or economies which are failing in general or simply failing a growing percentage of poor people.

The young people who formed the focus group that reviewed the early drafts of this document felt strongly that the outcomes of the work reflected a sad reality. Initially they felt that the report should be widely used inside Liberia to show politicians how difficult the situation they are living in is for them. Suggestions of how the document should be used at first included Don Bosco and Save the Children making formal presentations of the work to each government ministry. On reflection, and bearing in mind the political situation in the country, the young people acknowledged the difficulty that this strategy might present and suggested that Don Bosco talk about aspects of the

findings, without talking about the study *per se*, on their radio shows so that people are familiar with the ideas and can discuss them at home.

They also felt that the study should inform Don Bosco staff about how their world looks and recommended that Save the Children does similar studies in other places to see if the changes they have experienced are similar.

Annex I: Case Studies: the Families of Some of the Young Researchers

These short case studies were compiled by the young people concerned and hence reflect the words they themselves used.

Boy 1 is in 10th grade and lives with an aunt and uncle (whom he calls his father) and five male cousins, the oldest is aged 40 and one is younger (in 9th grade). No one in the family is working. The uncle worked for a logging company as the security supervisor for the county, and before the war he had property in Monrovia and in the countryside. His aunt had a market business before the war and she sold goods from the rural areas. “Life was sweet”.

There are 8 living in the house. He says his uncle is supporting all of them. At the end of each month people at the church put something together for them and gives the uncle a small stipend. There is a sister (and brothers) in the United States who sends money each month too. The Aunt paces the money received for the month.

At home they eat every day. They eat rice, but it is mixed with bulgar wheat¹³ and there is soup (sauce) each day, usually with some fish. There are small children in the yard (neighbours’ children) who also eat with them.

There is no food in the morning, he goes to school and “I rally with my men on campus for food and money” – he gets his friends together they put money into a kitty which he takes care of and they buy food to eat in the school day. He shares it out and keeps more than his share for himself. Sometimes his friends give him five dollars (approximately US\$ 0.10c).

He and his younger cousin sometimes pick up casual labour. His real mother had a relationship with one of the sisters at the Catholic Church he used to go to and work for her between 6th and 8th grade. Now the nun is gone he does not work there. He wants to find a way to have his own money, but to do “labour work” you cannot also go to school.

In the house they cannot talk about work business, as the Uncle only wants to do “paper work” and is not interested in other work. This goes for the four high school graduates as well, they won’t do “labour work”.

Boy 2 lives with a woman he calls his mother, whose husband is in Guinea. There are six children in the house, from twenty years of age down to thirteen. No one is working. The girl of 20 has a boyfriend who gives them money and the oldest girl is married and also gives them money she gets from her husband. Sometimes he works on the school campus and then uses this money for school materials. They eat once every day. Rice with some bulgar wheat, meat or fish.

Girl 1. The household includes the mother (a catechist) and two sisters, one of whom is twenty-six (with five children) and one who is twenty-three (with one child). The mother manages the money and the daughters do not work. Their home was destroyed when they went to Côte d'Ivoire as refugees. They are now living in a different place, sometimes she comes home there is no food or she cooks her own food. They do not eat every day. They eat rice or cassava with soup (sauce) but there is not always fish and there is never meat. "One-one time America money" (occasional remittances from America) comes to the family.

Boy 3 is an ex-combatant. His father works as a hospital registrar and his mother was in business before. His father still works, but is not paid. His mother sells things as does his sister.

There are seven children and youths in the house. He wants to be a doctor, though knows it is not too realistic (he is 17 and in 5th Grade) but he will try. He asks people for money and gets it. He also accepts "gifts". He is an ex-fighter and does not see anything strange about that. He tells his parents about the money (usually) and then spends it on himself. He also does some casual labour.

Boy 4. Before, his father was a civil servant and his mother had a shop and a civil service job. There were two children and a lot of boys in the house as his father had a football team and they stayed there. Now there are four extra children and no footballers, the extra children are separated children who have lost their people. The father is dead and the mother now works in a store selling for someone. The extra children help, they take market to school with them and sell in the schoolyard, and their money is what feeds the family. He earns his own school money by helping people with cleaning and washing and other services. He would like to be President of Liberia.

Girl 2 wants to be a businesswoman as it is the only way to sustain the country, and no other job has respect. To be a doctor would not be a good choice. At her school there is not the same level of corruption among teachers and education is better because the teachers are paid and qualified. There are several extra people in the house now – cousins and the son of a neighbour who cannot afford to look after him.

Girl 3. Her father works as a civil servant but is not paid regularly, her mother has two government teaching jobs and a private job. Only the private one really ever pays. In the house the older brother pays for himself and there is some prostitution.

Girl 4. Before the war she lived with her mother (selling) and father (forester) and brother and sister. The parents both worked. Now she lives with her grandmother, four uncles and aunts and the various grandchildren, they are fifteen in the family in two houses. She gets her money from her father and this money is hers. Money comes every month from the USA from various sources and the family is dependent on that. She gets given petty cash by people and they use the transportation money that Don Bosco gives them for other things, not transportation. She wants to be a “big” person (important) and work for herself, she would like to be a child psychologist but not in Liberia, she wants to get out of Liberia. She has the contacts to go. But if she stays accountancy is a good job.

Girl 5. Before the war she lived in a small family; mother, uncle and two sisters. Now her mother is in the States. Her sisters are big. She lives with her auntie and her husband (the aunt is a civil servant and is hardly paid, the husband works at an NGO and has a regular income) she also lives there with her two brothers. To get money she asks her mother and her mother sends money directly to her and her brothers; the mother also sends money to the aunt, though this is not always regular. She might want to stay in Liberia, but she is not sure. She wants to be a social worker or journalist, but it is difficult to do big things in Liberia though. Social work is good because you can always be carried (given a lift) by people and mix with white people and get to know a lot of people.

Boy 5. There were fifteen people in the home before the war, now fewer. There is a sister in the states who sends money when she has got it. He gets money from staff at Don Bosco. Wants the same thing as Girl 5 for the same reasons.

Girl 6 lives with her great uncle, her uncle and his wife and plenty of their children and other relatives’ children from the interior. She was put in an orphanage during the war because her uncle could not cope, but they took her away because she was so unhappy. Her uncle is a salesman and her aunt sells. The children do not really work. She used to get her money from prostitution but now she has learned to hair dress and does two or three people’s hair on a Saturday to make money. There is no unity in her family. The older brother (cousin) works and goes to school. He was sponsoring her in school but when her younger brother and sister (cousins) came up to school age he transferred the school fees to them. She sometimes gets money at holidays and Christmas. She has no contacts to leave Liberia but would like to. She’d like to have a skill that can pay her to do sociology at university.

Boy 6. He lives with his father, who works at a public corporation (not paid often) and does extra work in the port, two sisters (one has a baby and the other gets money through her steady boyfriend), a small brother and a baby. The mother is in the states and sends money to the family. He would like to leave and be a chemical engineer in the United States, if he has to stay Liberia to be a doctor would be OK but it is not desirable. He has connections to go to America.

Footnotes

ⁱ At the outset of the research the on-going conflict in Liberia was limited to areas of Northern Lofa. It has subsequently spread to much of the north and west of the country and it is now debatable whether the situation in Liberia should be described as “post war”.

¹ Several books and papers have been published describing how ECOWAS peacekeepers (ECOMOG) became actively involved in the war. Like other sides in the conflict ECOMOG has been accused of taking action guided principally by the desire to access Liberia’s mineral and other natural resources.

² See also Gracia, Verdiana (1999): “Children and Adolescents in Post Conflict Settings (the Grey Area)”, mimeo, Stockholm, Rädda Barnen.

³ Save the Children Sweden, West Africa Regional Office, and Don Bosco Homes, Liberia undertook the research jointly. David Tolfree, served as project advisor and analysed the 112 written interviews and much of his text has been incorporated into this document.

⁴ The discussions with the young people involved in the research were formulated around the agreed list of topic areas but not limited to the questionnaire format devised for the interviews. Despite the fact that four different adults facilitated different group discussions they invariably took on a similar pattern and produced very similar outcomes.

⁵ The definitions given by the young people of respect and power are discussed below in section 3.3.

⁶ Another example, given several times, is of parents who actively encourage their daughters to go out and have sex for money so that they can buy their own clothes and pay school fees. While everyone says this was not how it should be several of the girls feel it is not a bad thing under the circumstances because the girls with money and clothes have more independence and more respect.

⁷ “Being loose” is defined as doing what one wants, not following the rules of the home, going out and answering adults back.

⁸ Community leadership in urban areas is not limited by age criteria.

⁹ The term “before-war children” describes people who were children in the pre-war period (including themselves): “after-war children” are those who are children and young people today.

¹⁰ It would appear that this was actually beginning to change under the presidency of Tolbert before the 1980s.

¹¹ The changed economic fortunes in families are vividly depicted in the case studie, which appear as an Appendix.

¹² In one area of Monrovia a community gradually developed their own community mechanisms for child protection through a series of awareness days where children and young people expressed their own views on matters affecting them and the community and where they were listened to and action taken. The momentum has continued here and in other communities.

¹³ Bulgar wheat is a much-hated food imported for free distribution by international and national food aid programmes. Bulgar can be bought on the open market at a price that is significantly below the price of rice, the national staple. As people do not like the taste of bulgar wheat they mix it with rice to make up the bulk carbohydrates needed.