



In the wake of



the war

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. Many of the social security systems we take for granted are missing here. So how do you protect the children?

In this war-torn country Save the Children has built on the local communities.

WRITER NADJA DEBOVE **PHOTOGRAPHER** KARL MELANDER

BAINDU KPAKA LEANS forward and puts her arm around Iye Bayons' shoulder.

"How are you doing now," she asks.

"Well, it's a lot better. My daughter doesn't play truant any more, she helps out at home and I don't shout, instead I try to listen and understand. We're fine," says Iye. We have both made an effort.

Baindu looks pleased. As a member of the child welfare committee Baindu has been following Iye's family for almost a year. She has become voluntarily involved to make sure that the children in Daru, a village in eastern Sierra Leone, are doing well with their families.

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. Many of the social security systems that we take for granted are missing here. For example, there's no child allowance or sufficiently trained health care personnel. Also, there are no developed social welfare services.

"We can only rely on ourselves and our families," says John Turay, who is also a member of the child welfare committee.

The vulnerability that comes with poverty often forces unreasonable decisions, he explains. Such as letting children work to support the family instead of going to school.

"Poor people have no choice."

One of the reasons the social security network is so feebly developed is that Sierra Leone has had difficulties recovering from the war. It lasted for more than ten years and shattered large parts of the country and its population.

"Those affected most of all were the children," says Mohamed Sannoh, one of Save the Children's program officers, who was there when the organisation started its activities during the conflict.

→ For example some needed help to trace and reunite with their families, others needed to be protected from assaults that followed in the wake of the war. Many children had been forced to become soldiers and needed rehabilitation.

The situation was chaotic. We saw the enormous needs to provide protection for the children, but realised that there were no central resources at hand. Therefore we chose to build on local communities.

THE IDEA WAS to get the inhabitants to support and take responsibility for their children themselves. Traditional leaders, responsible adults and in some cases also children became involved. The model, a kind of local social service for children, turned out to work and was later spread to other parts of the country. Today it is written in the new Child Rights Act that every village must establish their own child welfare committee. The assignment is voluntary and without compensation.

“What is crucial is the will to do something positive and good for the children, not the economy,” says Mohamed Sannoh.

He explains that from the start their main task was to support children directly affected by the war.

“Today it is about spreading information about child-upbringing and children’s rights as well as preventing violence.”

For example, the committees often interfere and mediate in family conflicts. Baidu Kpaka meets parents who may have got into conflict with their children because of fighting at school or stealing things. Others worry about their daughters getting pregnant very young.

“I’m talking about alternative ways of resolving conflicts. Traditionally, children should obey the adults, never question, never be seen or heard, she says. I explain that of course children shall respect their parents, but they also have the right to be listened to. I’m trying to create a mutual understanding.

“Sometimes it can be difficult, the dispute may have gone on for a long time, she continues. Therefore you need patience and the ability to listen, and of course stubbornness. We cannot give up until everything is

“Parents must realize that children are little people with special needs and rights

resolved; it just causes more damage to the families.”

THE NEW CHILD RIGHTS Act means not only that the committees’ task and role have been defined, crimes against children must now always be reported and investigated by the police.

It means that children’s legal status has had a major upgrade, says Sheku Tarawillie, who is superintendent and child investigator in the district.

Historically, families would rather reach an amicable settlement. If somebody exposed a child to a crime he could escape punishment by paying or performing a service for the abused child’s family.

The committees play an important role in police work.

They are our eyes and ears in the villages and report to us if something serious has happened in a family.

But the problem is that many parents still refuse to report crimes, says Sheku Tarawillie and shrugs his shoulders in resignation. They often gain more from settling the dispute amicably.

“Attitudes towards children must change,” he says.

“Parents should not be able to dismiss a violation. They must realize that children are little people with special needs and rights. But changing attitudes take time.”

Mohamed Sannoh from Save the Children agrees – but is still hopeful.

“Given that we started from nothing, I still feel that we have come a long way. Today, the children know where to turn if they encounter problems. And they know that some adults in the village care and keep an extra close eye on them.” ■



Republic of Sierra Leone

POPULATION: 6 million
CAPITAL: Freetown
CONSTITUTION: Republic, unitary state
AREA: 71,740 square kilometres
RELIGIONS: Traditional, indigenous religions, 40% Muslims
INFANT MORTALITY: 165 per 1,000 births
GDP/INHABITANT: 341 US dollars (2009)
READING AND LITERACY: 35%
ACCESS TO FRESH WATER: 61%
NUMBER OF HIV-INFECTED (ages 15-64): 1.6%
ACCESS TO TELEPHONE: 22 per 1,000 inhabitants

Save the Children in Sierra Leone

The war in Sierra Leone lasted between 1991 and 2002. Save the Children has been operating in the country since 1999. At that time the activities were focused on demobilization, rehabilitation and integration of children forced to work as child soldiers during the war, and to reunite children separated from their families.

Today the major focus is:

- To protect children from violence and abuse
- Offer free health care to some 60,000 children
- Support more than 20,000 children to ensure they get better education



70 % of the population is unemployed.



Many places lack both sewage, electricity and water.



In the slum area Rokupa children play among the trash.



Baindu Kapka is a member of the child welfare committee which has existed for over 10 years. The committee ensures that the young people in the village are doing well within their families. "Today children are better protected than when I was little."

FATIMATA CONTEH, 16, is standing on the stairs to the family's house braiding a friend's hair. Her mother Hawa is cooking. Until only a year ago life was simple here. But then Fatimata got pregnant.

"When the teacher saw my belly I was thrown out of school. At the same time my mother said she couldn't afford to have me stay at home. She wanted me to marry the father of the child and move to his place."

At school one of the friends found out what was happening to Fatimata. The friend was a member of the child rights club. It is a club established by Save the Children, which supports and informs both adults and children in the village about their rights.

"She certainly didn't think I should agree to getting married, but first of all I should aim to finish school."

Some of the club members went to the mother to persuade her to keep Fatimata at home and let her finish school.

Today Fatimata has a two month old little boy, next term she will go back to school again. Today she is also a member of the child rights club. She is supporting the teenage mothers in the village.

"I know from personal experience what it's like to be a young mother. It is important for me to share that knowledge and maybe prevent more teenage mothers from leaving school."







Survey What is the hardest part of growing up in a poor country?

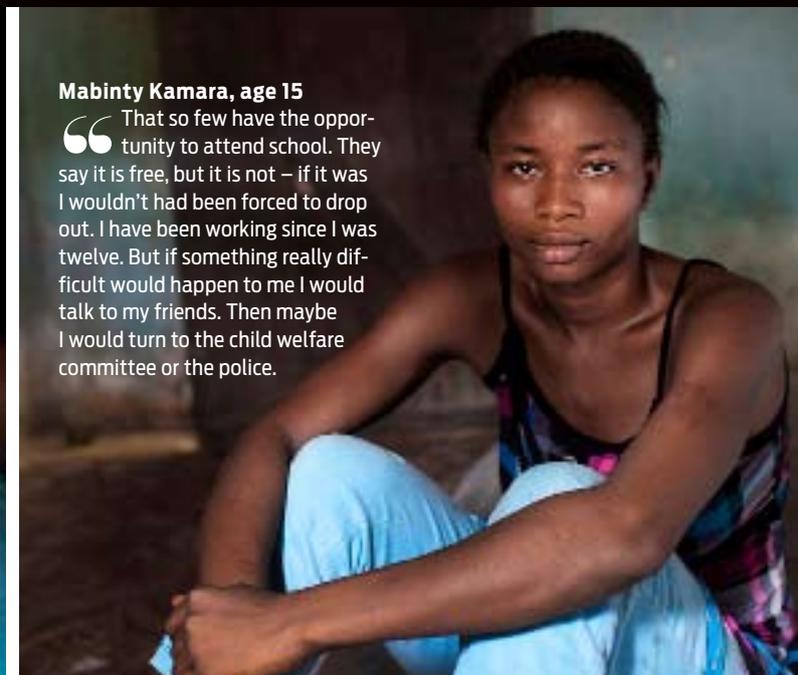
Kadiatu Bangura, age 16

“ So few being able to afford to go to school affects many young ones. Everyone should be given a chance to a better life. Another problem growing up here is that it is so crowded which makes it hard to find good places where we can play. If something serious would happen I would talk to my friends, but if there would be blood and such, I would probably report it to the police.



Mabinty Kamara, age 15

“ That so few have the opportunity to attend school. They say it is free, but it is not – if it was I wouldn't had been forced to drop out. I have been working since I was twelve. But if something really difficult would happen to me I would talk to my friends. Then maybe I would turn to the child welfare committee or the police.





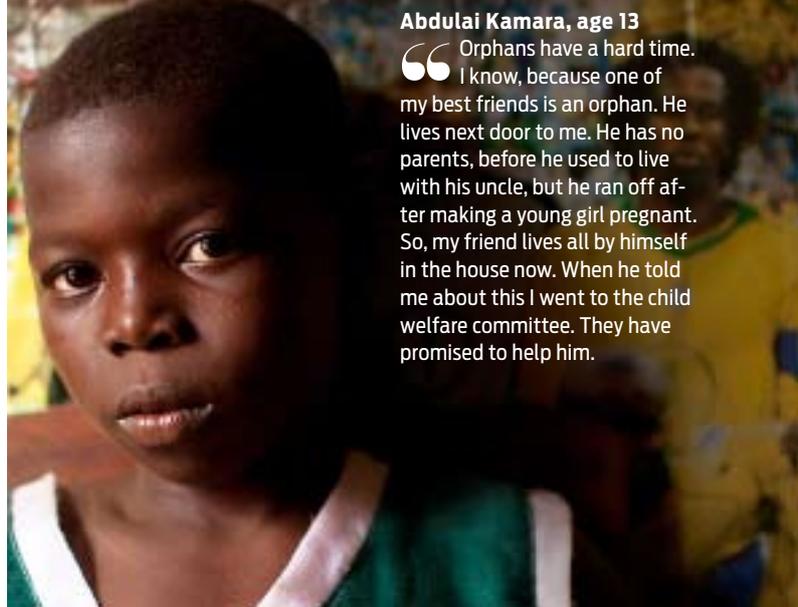
Ismail Sesay, age 16

“Hunger is the most difficult. I can never have enough to eat. But there’s nothing you can do about it – you just have to go on living as best you can. But if something serious happened to me, if I was beaten or so, I would report it to the child welfare committee in the area.”



Abdulai Kamara, age 13

“Orphans have a hard time. I know, because one of my best friends is an orphan. He lives next door to me. He has no parents, before he used to live with his uncle, but he ran off after making a young girl pregnant. So, my friend lives all by himself in the house now. When he told me about this I went to the child welfare committee. They have promised to help him.”





“The war was all about

During the war in Sierra Leone many children were used as child soldiers.

Morrison Jusu, 26, is one of them.

When he was only 13 years old he was forced to become a soldier in the rebel movement.

WRITER NADJA DEBOVE **PHOTOGRAPHER** KARL MELANDER

MORRISON JUSU GREW up in a small town in eastern Sierra Leone. He went to school, played football and had a lot of friends. But when he was seven years old his life took a new turn. The town where he lived was captured by the rebel movement, the RUF, and a civil war broke out.

The war lasted for more than 10 years. Apart from at least 50,000 people killed, a quarter of a million women were exposed

to sexual violence and ten thousands of children were kidnapped. Some 30,000 children were forced to become soldiers.

Morrison was one of them.

One day in June on his way to school he was captured by the rebels. He was only 13 years old.

“First of all I got military training and was taught how to handle weapons.”

Morrison believes that children are used in

the war because they are cheap to keep. They are also easy to manipulate. You can make them do things adults wouldn’t agree to.

“It was like a brain wash. You just obeyed, it was all about survival.”

Morrison’s task during his years as a child soldier was to carry weapons and ammunition to the front line.

“What I saw was terrible. I can barely talk about it. Just imagine, you’re talking to someone and the next second that person is dead. It happened all the time. It was human slaughter – and I watched it happen.”

THE FEAR OF being injured or killed was also painful.

It was a constant stress. I longed so much for my family, school and a normal life. But I had no choice – I just had to carry on.

When Morrison had taken part in the war for three years, people from the UN



survival”

came and negotiated to get some of the child soldiers out of it – among them Morrison and his brother. They were brought to Save the Children’s centre in the village Daru to rehabilitate.

We went to school, played and talked about our experiences. The time at the centre changed my life. I regained hope – as well as belief in myself.

After a couple of months, staff from Save the Children managed to trace and reunite Morrison with his family.

“That was probably the best day of my life. I hope that I one day will experience the same feeling of happiness as when I saw that my parents and siblings were still alive.”

However, neighbours and the school were not as pleased to have him back. The school refused to accept Morrison, the adults forbade their children to play with him.

“They said I had rebel-blood in my veins.”

Morrison thinks that he will never completely get rid of the memories from the war. They are still there like deep scars.

“At the same time I know I am fortunate, no one in my family was injured or killed. Despite everything – we survived.” ■

Save the Children trains soldiers

Sierra Leone is one of many countries in Africa affected by long term armed conflicts. Since the mid 1990s Save the Children has trained the military and peace keeping forces in East- and Western Africa. The purpose is to make them aware of how children are affected by armed conflicts and how best to protect them. Every year Save the Children trains 12,000 soldiers in Africa.

Sierra Leone today – Sweden yesterday

Two hundred years ago the situation in Sweden was similar to the situation today in developing countries. Poverty was widespread. Working conditions uncertain. Many families were living on the margins.

“Not until the 1900s the state would enter as a guarantor for the good childhood, says Bengt Sandin, professor.

WRITER NADJA DEBOVE

FROM A HISTORICAL perspective, the security the state offers children in Sweden today is a relatively new phenomenon. Only 200 years ago many were struggling with severe problems in supporting their families. Infant and maternal mortality was high. Children begging and child labour were common. Just like in Sierra Leone today.

“The support for the most vulnerable was dependant on charity. The families had to survive as best they could,” says Bengt Sandin senior lecturer of history and professor at the Department of Children, University of Linköping.

Child labour was not banned until the end of the 1800s and schooling became mandatory. When the children were gathered in one place the differences between their gender, economy and health became visible for the first time. An awareness of children’s different social conditions began to emerge.

“The state began to take more responsibility.”

In 1902 the first child welfare law came into force. The law stated that the state had a responsibility to protect children. A few years later it became mandatory for every municipality to establish a child welfare board. They were supposed to ‘help abused or neglected children if their lives and health were at risk or if they were risking becoming maladjusted’.

“Also the view of children changed, they were more and more seen as competent people with resources. For the first time people now talked about children’s’ rights to food, protection and care.”

In the 1930s the first child health centers were established and maintenance for single mothers was distributed. In the 1940s free school lunches were introduced along with the general child allowance. General vaccinations against diphtheria, polio and tetanus were later introduced.

It wasn’t until in 1957 corporal punishment in school was banned and in 1979 the general law against corporal punishment was adopted.

It was of great importance that children by law had the same right to physical integrity as adults, Bengt Sandin says.

Towards the end of the 1900s children also had greater opportunities to express their views on issues concerning them, for example in custody disputes.

“Today they even have legal protection from verbal threats and insults.” ■