**POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND PEACEBUILDING: A Social Change Initiative on Political Violence and Positive Peace Ahead of Sierra Leone’s General Elections**

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**ABSTRACT**

This report is the culmination of a project on electoral violence and peace advocacy mostly targeting a vulnerable youths considered as perpetrators and victims of politically related violence. Elections violence is a form of political violence executed during elections processes to influence political outcomes, settle long standing political and/or social scores and used for economic benefits by perpetrators.

The report is segmented into four chapters detailing the implementation activities and outcomes from the various interventions carried out. The first chapter starts with an introduction/background that gives an overview of the political, social and security history of Sierra Leone. The chapter also outlines the main objectives of the project and highlights some of the challenges during the implementation of the project.

Chapter two reviews various literature on the electoral violence and highlights the theoretical underpinnings of electoral related violence. The various methods adopted to implement the project are also detailed in this chapter.

In chapter three, the key interventions, and feedbacks during the implementation of the social change initiative are discussed. Additionally, the chapter also illustrates the impacts of the initiative to the criminal gang kingpins.

Chapter four concludes with an overview of the activities, their impacts and suggests policy recommendations and sustainability plans for consideration by various stakeholders. The chapter notes that electoral violence is a threat that can be addressed with political and investment in capacity building and development programs. The report also has appendices where pectoral evidence of engagements and transcripts of various testimonies are attached.

**CHAPTER ONE**

1. **Introduction**

In the early 90’s Sierra Leone experienced a post-independence civil conflict lasting for more than a decade with tremendous humanitarian consequences. The conflict triggered a wave of violence and political instability leading to coups and counter coups. A UNDP report suggests that the war resulted to more than 70,00 casualties and more than 2.6 million people were displaced. The causes of the civil conflict are numerous. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on Sierra Leone further suggests that the war was largely caused by political corruption and bad governance (TRC, 2004). The political economy of the civil conflict also prolonged the war. War lords exploited the vast mineral wealth mostly the illicit sale of diamonds to fuel and prolong the conflict.

While the absence of an active conflict would suggest progress in the promoting peace and stability, more than two decades after the end of the civil conflict, political corruption, bad governance, and high rates of youth unemployment remain serious challenges to the country’s stability and development. Despite the advent of democracy and the establishment of local councils to decentralize the service delivery, Sierra Leone still ranks in the bottom of the human development index at 181 out of 195 in 2021 (Human Development Index, 2021). This is largely due to widespread corruption undermining service delivery and development in the public sector (Afro Barometer, 2017).

Additionally, the youth bulge in Sierra Leone has become a contemporary challenge that the central government is clearly struggling to address. Recent statistics place the Sierra Leone youth population to be one-third of the country’s total population (over 1,500,000 young men and women). A total of about 70% of this figure are either unemployed or underemployed and 50% are illiterate and unskilled (Statistics Sierra Leone: 2015). There is visible unemployment mostly among young men in the streets of the country’s capital Freetown and other urban areas of the country.

The early 2000’s saw the emergence of a gang culture following the deportation Sierra Leonean citizens mostly from the US. These individuals and artistes established gang groups reflecting the gang culture prominent in African American communities in the US mostly to mobilize solidarity and support towards a common lifestyle. Consequently, the widespread youth unemployment coupled with the gang rivalries led to spontaneous youth violence in the major cities of Sierra Leone.

Studies have shown that youth unemployment is a potential source of political instability given their vulnerability to radicalization and recruitment into violence including violent extremism and terrorism (African Development Bank Group, May2013). This has been seen in Freetown and other urban areas where crime rates including violent protests and electoral violence have surged during elections processes and during festivities.

This report explores electoral violence committed by criminal gangs and attempts to work with these criminal gangs to disseminate peace messages and reverse the growing trends of political violence as Sierra Leone approaches general elections in 2023.

* 1. **Problem Statement**

Although Sierra Leone has experienced dictatorship and a brutal civil conflict; the country has recently positioned itself to become an epitome of post-conflict transformation. It is believed that the post-conflict gains can be sustained by strengthening the country’s democratic credentials, increasing participation of minority groups and creation of an enabling environment to enhance human and infrastructural development.

Sierra Leone’s political, security and democratic credentials appear to have been undermined by political intolerance and spontaneous electoral violence mostly perpetrated by political thugs under the influence of narcotics. The problems associated with youth unemployment have increased the desperation of criminal gangs who have resorted to violence to survive and advance political goals of their political godfathers.

Studies have shown that the youth bulge can become an asset if properly harnessed given that capacitating these criminal gangs with civic education and creating livelihood opportunities through education and innovation are critical to achieve sustainable national development. Therefore, this initiative attempts to address a key problem affecting the democratic credentials of the country which is electoral violence and negative peace and attempts to provide mentoring and deliver peace messages to gangs’ kingpins as a way of inspiring them to be productive citizens.

The initiative presupposes that negative peace, inadequate security and development are direct consequences of limited opportunities or access to resources by youths or criminal gangs coupled with endemic marginalization of gang members. The effects of limited opportunities and marginalization of youths remains extremely costly as seen during the brutal civil conflict in the country and the increasing crime rates in major cities.

* 1. **Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this social change initiative is to contribute towards tackling politically induced violence from the political environment of post-conflict Sierra Leone. Since the guns went silent, Sierra Leone’s security and development have improved at an appreciable rate. Sierra Leone has also made significant democratic progress by successfully conducting five elections and transitioning power from one political party to another. These laudable democratic credentials could be undermined by the seemingly increase in political intolerance and political violence both of which could also undermine the credibility of the 2023 general elections in the country. Criminal gangs and/or political thugs loyal to political stakeholders, are at the center of such malicious activities. Political stakeholders exploit the vulnerabilities of these criminal gangs to advance their political interests which include influencing political outcomes. Therefore, this initiative is designed to inspire and educate gang leaders to desist from political violence and promote peace messages to contribute towards national security and development.

The objectives of the initiatives shall be the following:

1. To deliver peace or non-violence messages to gang kingpins and encourage them to disseminate these messages to their cohorts.
2. To popularize national elections registration and verification activities and encourage gangs’ kingpins to fully participate in such processes.
3. To encourage community-based organizations to improve advocacy on inclusion of marginalized groups in society.
   1. **Challenges and Mitigation Strategies**

Every field activity or project implementation has its own unique challenges, and this initiative is no different. Firstly, there was a difficulty in obtaining reliable data on the criminal gang groups within the Western Area and their patterns of life. The data available with law enforcement officers only informs of crime statistics for specific periods. The researcher found it challenging to obtain literature on the manifestations of gang violence in Sierra Leone given that much has not been written on this topic. This challenge was surmounted through engagements with experts in handling youth issues in Freetown and local community stakeholders. Local stakeholders and some community youths provided useful information on rendezvous and patterns of life of criminal gangs which was a useful guide to confront the target group.

Additionally, there were several logistical challenges including funding issues to implement this field activity. Although the initiative was designed to be cost-effective, attracting meagre financial resources to implement the project was challenging against the backdrop of rising cost of living in the country. However, the researcher obtained support from another Rotary Peace Fellow and local authorities experienced in youth activism. Given that the initiative required minimal financial resources, the researcher used his personal resources to provide food, fuel and transportation refunds to participants and partners.

Inadequate innovation and entrepreneurial opportunities to back up initiatives aimed at encouraging youths to improve their capacity. Sierra Leone currently lacks adequate technical and vocational institutions to teach technical skills to the middle-level manpower most of whom are young people. The few available ones are poorly equipped and have not been able to adequately create jobs and address the issues of youth unemployment. An initiative of this nature should ideally link youths or criminal gangs to such opportunities to improve their capacity and enhance their welfare. To address this challenge, the researcher encouraged community-based organizations working on youth advocacy issues to increase advocacy and support for gang members. Besides, the success of the initiative inspired partners to increase their efforts to advocate and attract support for similar programs.

Furthermore, there was a certain level of resistance from the criminal gang kingpins during the initial engagements. Some of the criminal gang members had the perception that the initiative is intended to use them as scapegoats to attract funding or to profile them on behalf of law enforcement. The researcher made extensive use of local authorities to address this concern.

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**CHAPTER TWO**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**2.0. Definitions and Scope of Political/Electoral Violence**

There is no single definition of election-related violence. However, attempts have been made to characterize electoral violence by several scholars. Philip Alsotn’s (2010) report points to the main approaches and definitions to electoral violence, which are mainly constructed around motives for influencing elections outcomes. This description is also upheld by Hald (2010:1) who described electoral violence as an activity ‘employed to affect electoral outcomes.’

Hoglund (2009:417) notes that ‘electoral violence is separated from other forms of political violence by a combination of timing and motive. The time aspect relates to violence carried out during the election period. The objective of electoral violence is to influence electoral process and in extensions its outcomes’. This definition limits the scope of elections processes which include several corresponding activities leading up to an election. The definition assumes that elections violence outside polling day may not necessarily be characterized as elections violence; disregarding the fact that manipulating elections outcome through violence could be done way before polling day.

Fischer (2002:4) attempts to define electoral violence as a form of conflict which harms or poses a threat of harm to any person or property involved in the elections process, the process itself, during the elections period. This definition gives a description of electoral violence; however, the author also limits the electoral violence as an act of violence carried out only during elections period. The definition does not however consider the various forms of political violence that are prominent outside the elections calendar but could influence important elections events.

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines the concept more broadly to constitute ‘an act threat or coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition’. Unsurprisingly, this definition is broad and describes the common trends of electoral violence in many parts of the world as reported by elections observers.

On the other hand, Bardal (2016) attempted to provide a comprehensive description of electoral violence as a subcategory of political violence. Bardal (2016) furthered that electoral violence is a ‘means of controlling and/or oppressing an individuals or group’s rights to participate in political processes and institutions using emotional, social, or economic force, coercion, as well as physical and sexual harm. According to Bardal, electoral violence may take place in public or private spaces, including in the family the general community, online and via media, or be perpetrated or condoned by the state’. This definition gives a broad description of electoral violence and the includes contemporary descriptions of electoral violence several of which are conducted online.

Contrary to widespread beliefs that electoral violence is mainly perpetrated to influence elections outcomes, Alston (2010:5) underscores that some electoral killings ‘are not motivated by an intention to influence elections, with killings in the context of riots or protests. While some protest may be intended to influence or change electoral outcomes, others are motivated by indigitation, anger and disappointment with a result, and are not necessarily intended to change that result’. This description accounts for other factors that influence electoral violence. While also acknowledging that electoral violence may be conducted to influence elections outcomes, other forms of electoral violence happen out of widespread dissatisfaction over electoral processes or hate. An example would be the numerous hate speeches targeting political stakeholders under the guise of criticism after elections. These sorts of online bullying are not necessarily conducted to influence elections outcomes but are often sustained negative propaganda intended to build a solidarity of hate against a particular set of people or policy.

The United Nations (UN) has also contributed to the discourse on electoral violence and notes that this form of violence is a sub-category of political violence, and it is ‘designed to influence an electoral outcome and therefore the distribution of political power’. According to the UN, electoral violence can include physical violence as well as coercion or intimidation. These manifestations of violence can occur during all different phases of the electoral cycle. The UN also indicates that the political order has not managed to achieve a balance between competing political interests more generally. The UN’s definition provides a nexus between political power and access or control over resources as a key driver of political violence. It presupposes that access to political authority guarantees access to resources and the competition for these resources is often a motivation for electoral violence especially in a system where the ‘winner takes all’ democratic system operates. This definition accounts for the various forms of electoral violence particularly taking place in developing countries such as Africa where some political leaders assume office mainly to amass wealth for their personal aggrandizement and for the benefits of their political cronies.

From the above definitions, electoral violence is not unique to any country; it is widespread and has existed for years with very many causes some of which include historic grievances dating several years back and manipulating elections outcomes.

**2.1. Youths and Crimes**

Research on the age-crime curve suggests that the prevalence of youth violence increases in early adolescence, peaks during the late teens, and decreases more slowly as individuals “age out” of crime. Additionally, the age-crime curve has demonstrated that boys who live in more disadvantaged neighborhoods during early adolescence are significantly different than boys of the same age who live in advantaged neighborhoods (Fabio, Tu, Loeber, & Cohen, 2011). Thus, the effects of living in a disadvantaged neighborhood during early adolescence may contribute to high prevalence rates of violence throughout an individual’s life. This study explains the increase in crime rates among marginalized youths especially in slums settlements. In Sierra Leone and many parts of the world, vulnerable criminal gang groups are mostly found in such disadvantaged neighborhoods and often exploited .to commit various forms of physical violence to influence elections processes.

Merton (1938) theorized that high crime rates among youths are due to a disconnect between the goals of a culture and structures that allow livelihoods to be obtained. Merton further noted that decisions made at a macro, city-level could potentially create disadvantaged neighborhoods where individuals are relegated to a lifestyle that does not allow for the common goal of success. Merton’s argument underscores how policy directives have failed to address the problem of youth exclusion from the national cake.

**2.2. Theoretical Underpinnings of Political Violence**

The nature of our societies today presupposes that it is difficult to conceive a society without conflict or even violence, given that some scholars would suggest that violence could be a means to an end. Neiburg (1969) holds the view that it is incorrect to interpret political violence as either a deviation from a widely accepted normative order or as only a danger signal to elites so that they will be able to make concessions. Neigburg suggests that violence is an indication that there is a collective quest underway to discover new normative patterns:

*‘Social fits and seizures can be viewed as a form of search behavior, a pragmatic trial and-error method leading toward new political and social norms that better satisfy the strain towards security, predictability, and low-risk methods of conflict resolution which organized groups require and crave’.*

This belief is further held by proponents of the realist theory who believe that the world politics is essentially unchangeably a struggle among self-interest and whenever two or more groups are seeking the same interests, a conflict is likely to ensure between the groups (Frazer, 2018). This shows that the formation of political parties vying for the same political authority especially in the democratic system where ‘the winner takes all’ dominates governance, violence and conflict could become a tool to acquire competitive advantage.

This initiative also aligns more with theories suggesting that political violence can be avoided or banished from the political space. This initiative aligns with theories that suggest that violence, war, or conflict can be avoided or eradicated from politics if humans apply reason and universal ethics to human relations. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1991) further suggests that violence should be treated as a pathological rather than a normal feature of political life. The argument holds that politics may take a violent status at its initial point on account of the human conditions; however, these conditions can be managed to banish violence from politics.

In his first book Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India Steven Wilkinson suggests that political violence is not necessarily a spontaneous eruption of anger, on the other hand, electoral or ethnic violence are planned and implemented to achieve clear political goals. Wilkinson developed a theory that explains what influences politicians to resort to violence and suggest that political competition is a key driver motivating political or electoral violence. Consequently, the higher the electoral competition, the more likely the incidents of violence. This suggests that unhealth political rivalry is the core of fermenting political intolerance and violence.

Steven explores the ways in which electoral incentives have increased or decreased the likelihood of communal riots in different towns and states and at different times in India. Steven Wilkinson argues that given that politicians have traditional strongholds, they tend to offer protection to minority groups in contested areas to swing votes in their favour. Steven maintains that:

“*Democratic states protect minorities when it is in their governments’ electoral interest to do so. Specifically, politicians in government will increase the supply of protection when either of two conditions applies: when minorities are an important part of their party’s current support base, or the support base of one of their coalition partners in a coalition government; or when the overall electoral system in a state is so competitive-in terms of the effective number of parties-that there is therefore a high probability that the governing party will have to negotiate or form coalitions with minority-supported parties in the future, despite its own preferences*.” (p.7)

The above usually happens when the highly competitive nature of politics makes it likely for minority groups to be critical deciding factors. Thus, the competition for votes in these areas often leads to political violence.

Furthermore, Steven Wilkinson summarizes various theories to communal violence to include economic incentives, violence triggering much more violence, demographic balance, and security dilemma hypothesis. Steven maintains that while economic incentives sustain conflicts, they are usually not very important to initiate conflicts (S. Wilkinson, 2004).

Similarly, Richard Wilkinson in a ted talk also reaffirmed that income inequality is a key conflict driver and further suggests that if states have lower income inequality, they will not just be willing to trust each other but they will be willing to trust their elected officials to promote economic equality (Wilkinson, 2011).

Richard Wilkinson further argues that internal divisions in society including ethnic, religious, class effectively combine with electoral politics to encourage politicians to promote violence as a means towards achieving political goals (Wilkinson, 2004). Wilkinson added that the weak state institutions are exploited to perpetrate violence given that institutions like the judiciary and the security services can be easily manipulated by the political class in their favour. This view aligns with Mohamed Ayoub’s subaltern security theory which places significance in domestic variables in causing intrastate and interstate violence. Ayoub further argues that the level of state building in addition to ethnic differences within a state could trigger conflict (Gray, 2020). This assumption is given credence in the African setting where ethnicity, weak institutions and underdevelopment are key conflict drivers.

Weak state institutions generally tend to stifle political and economic inclusion or to support sustainable development. A weak position of state institutions mandated to enforce the law and end impunity will generally inspire more and more people to resort to violence with impunity. While this explanation may not be enough to account for the various forms of electoral violence, it provides a critical insight into how institutions are often manipulated by the governing elites to advance their political goals.

**2.3. Theory of Change**

The social change initiative is expected to contribute towards addressing political violence targeting the elections registration and verification period in Sierra Leone given that electoral violence and heightened political tensions have been prevalent in every elections stage in Sierra Leone. Elections violence is mostly perpetrated by unemployed gang members who are loyalists to political party stalwarts due to the cash incentives and other moral support provided on a regular basis. The moral support is usually in the form of assorted narcotics including alcohol intended to keep gangs members drunk and courageous to commit violence on behalf of politicians in Sierra Leone.

As already stated above, Sierra Leone has a high rate of youth unemployment with figures estimated to be more than 70% (UN: Joint Response to Youth Employment in Sierra Leone, 2012). This problem has been exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis forcing several businesses to scale down due to high running cost, low dividends, and uncertainties. Additionally, while Sierra Leone has successfully conducted five post-conflict elections leading to a peaceful transition of power from one political party to another, there has been a heightened political intolerance with deep rooted ethnic and regional dimensions between the two main political parties (Ethnic and Conflict Instigation in Sierra Leone, November 2020). The winner takes all political system means that each time there is a change of government, many people from the regional or tribal divide loose public sector jobs in a country where private sector investment remains weak and poorly regulated.

The study assumes that Sierra Leoneans can peacefully live together and exercise their civil or political rights without fear of intimidation or violence. As a matter of fact, ethnic identity did not feature in the eleven years civil conflict of Sierra Leone; rather, it is only fanned by desperately politicians using ethno-regional divisions to appeal to the emotions of the electorates and consolidate their support (Ethnic and Conflict Instigation in Sierra Leone, November 2020).

The study also assumes that a constructive engagement with criminal or political gangs’ kingpin with the involvement with major stakeholders at local level will address political violence in communities. Electoral violence is a category of political violence that deserves considerable attention in a post-conflict country that is highly vulnerable to relapse into another civil conflict as has been seen in countries like Afghanistan, Ivory Coast and Kenya. Besides, violence free elections are a significant benchmark to determine the legitimacy of a democratic government. Therefore, sustained public education on civil rights, advocacy against political violence, promoting conflict mitigation measures and dissemination of peace messages are critical to address electoral violence (Accord: Strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence, June 2010). As a matter of fact, political thugs are usually only hired by desperate political stalwarts during elections period because of their vulnerable conditions.

Consequently, the initiative is designed to engage gang kingpins in two communities notorious for violence in Freetown. During the engagements, several peace talks and public education on civil and political rights will be conducted with the help of local authorities including community-based organizations operating under a similar mandate and social media platforms. The targeted group will be equipped with resources and equipment to deliver peace messages to their peers during football matches and in their interactions with cohorts. Follow up monitoring activities will be conducted with the help of local stakeholders to enhance effective implementation with respect to the voter registration campaigns and peace education. The initiative will also disseminate peace messages on social media to contribute towards national electoral campaigns aimed at encouraging citizens to refrain from electoral violence and use peaceful electoral means to choose leaders contentiously.

The peer engagements with criminal gang kingpins coupled with the monitoring and follow up activities (through the help of local stakeholders) will raise increase public awareness about the need to participate in electoral processes, contribute towards addressing violence during registration and voter verification exercises in the selected communities and consequently promote a peace in the communities. The sustained social media campaigns on civil rights and the dissemination of peace messages will also help popularize messages of peace even beyond the targeted communities.

Below is a theory of change diagram that summarizes the social change initiative:

**Goals** **Activities** **Results/Outcomes**

Eliminate Political Violence;

Promote civic education

Greater awareness of civic responsibilities

Peaceful participation into political activities

Deliver peace messages online;

Deliver peace talks to gang kingpins

METHODOLOGY

**2.4. Methods and Design**

The initiative used a quasi-experimental design to address youth violence, popularize civic rights and give positive peace talks to inspire youths in the selected communities in Central Freetown. The approach was designed to minimize youth involvement in violent crimes during the elections cycle of Sierra Leone based on existing political tensions, a long history of youth involvement into political violence, high rates of unemployment and vulnerability and the increasing likelihood of a relapse into another civil conflict due to political intolerance.

The initiative is designed to implement a youth led advocacy initiative targeting forty gang leaders from the Parade Grounds playing field and Atouga Playing field in Central and Eastern Freetown respectively. These communities and youth leaders were identified through their informal leadership structures in their various gang or clique organizations with support from national crime statistics.

As mentioned previously, the researcher uses secondary data from law enforcement to identify kingpins and notorious gang organizations suspected of being involved in political violence. The criminal activities/tendencies of gang kingpins are the main independent variable. The dependent variables included the number of arrests, police contacts per person within a period of six months April and September 2022.

This list of high-risk youths, ages 20-35, served as a sampling frame from which the eligible criminal gang members were randomized to ensure that program participants and control group are not inherently different. The actual selection process of participants was done by individuals coordinating youth activities in the Freetown given the depth of their knowledge and experience in handling youth issues in the country.

The initiative was delivered on four different meeting with each meeting lasting about 60 minutes. The main activities include observation, focused-group discussions and motivational talks resulting to over ten pages of field notes which mostly include youth proposed solutions to the problem of youth bulge and political violence. Field notes were gleaned from the activities and interactions that were held during each session. Interviews were also conducted with three officials from the Ministry of Youth Affairs, and Civil Society Organisations and the police respectively on the problems of the youth bulge and violence.

There were aspects of the design, however, that raised possible threats to the internal validity and are worth mentioning. Selection bias is of concern due to the relatively small sample size of 40 eligible participants as well as the fact that the program participants were not chosen entirely at random. Also, the use of police data to measure indicators weakened the claims of reliability, as not all crimes are reported to the police.

Incentives in the form of meals and drinks were provided for participants even though the sessions did not last for more than 60 minutes. A debrief of partners dealing with youths’ activities in Freetown informs that the criminal gangs mostly depend on crime to survive and accessing a proper meal a day is a major challenge for many of the participants. This level of vulnerability is what is often exploited by individuals with nefarious motives to induce gang members into violent behaviour sometimes to achieve political goals. Thus, the provision of meals is to increase focus and contribute towards addressing the immediate challenge of food insecurity/hunger which is prevalent among these vulnerable youths.

In short, the program focuses on both group and individual level change by targeting gang leaders as well as gang members while using information on group processes in gangs to inform their program. The aim is to deter youth, gang kingpins from participating in criminal and/or political violence through advocacy, strategic communication messages disseminated in various social media platforms.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERVENTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

**3.0. Preparatory Activities**

Firstly, data was collected from law enforcement reports on annual crime statistics in the Western area. This data was analyzed to uncover the patterns and crime opportunity areas in Freetown. The final report was useful in identifying criminal hotspots or communities serving as popular rendezvous points of political thugs. Additionally, interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including the community youth leaders and community-based organizations firstly to seek their advice on the best possible ways of approaching such a vulnerable yet violent group.

**3.1. Interventions**

Following the completion of the preparatory groundwork, four peace meetings or sessions were conducted targeting two groups of criminal gang kingpins. The participants were identified to be vulnerable and extremely violent and are often used to mobilize their members to commit crimes including political violence. The meetings were introduced by a Rotary Peace Fellow who has vast experience in implementing youth empowerment programs targeting criminal gangs. Both of us facilitated the entire sessions but gave considerable amount of time to the participants to contribute to the discussions.

The key messages delivered are twofold: firstly, a passionate appeal was made to refrain from all forms of political violence and the enormous implications or long-term effects of political violence on the State and the well-being of every citizen were emphasized. We highlighted how political violence could influence the election of bad leaders with limited capacity to address social and economic issues including unemployment, and limited access to basic amenities including food and shelter especially for youths. We also noted that political violence is a major threat to safety and security and recounted the legacies of the brutal civil conflict in the country that led to the loss of many lives, property, and disruption of public order. We informed them that the impacts of the civil war are still with us and have undermined the government’s abilities to create an enabling environment for job creation, innovation, and technology. We referenced, a violent protest on the 10th August, 2022 that led to the death of over thirty youths mostly members of criminal gang cells and informed them that political violence could easily lead to the death of anyone of them or their close relatives. Furthermore, we gave the religious implications of violence, as an act that is against the will of God and anyone whose actions leads to the death or injury of lives will give an account to the Almighty.

Secondly, we introduced the eight pillars of positive peace to the participants and how they combine to ensure a fully functional and productive society. Given that the literacy rate among the participants in quite low, we explained the meaning of each of the eight pillars of positive peace, which include: Well-functioning Government, Sound Business Environment, Equitable Distribution of Resources, Acceptance of the Rights of Others, Good Relations with Neighbours, Free Flow of Information, High Levels of Human Capital, and Low Levels of Corruption. We also informed the participants about how violence of any sort undermines the eight pillars of positive peace and by extension a decent society. We introduced them to the benefits of skills acquisition to earn a living and contribute towards society. We explained cost-effective approaches to skills acquisition which do not necessarily warrant seeking admission into a formal school setting to obtain a certificate. Some of these include making good use of internet sites including YouTube to acquire a skill. We also introduced them to a web-based app on google play store called ‘LearnAm’ which could be used to literacy and numeracy skills in the local parlance. We demonstrated to them how to download and use the LearnApp platforms given that all instructions and content delivery is done using a local language. Given that data and smart phones can be a real challenge for most of these individuals, we encouraged them to engage in activities like sports including soccer or form networks to carryout activities like collection of plastic wastes and scrap metals and we recommended business entities around town that will buy such items from them. We informed them that such activities will also contribute to promote hygiene and we gave an instance of individuals whose scrap metal or plastic waste businesses are doing so well.

The meetings also provided an opportunity to listen to the concerns of criminal gangs on issues bordering around improving their welfare. The messages that cut across the growing concerns are traditional legacies of marginalization and poor governance which have contributed to their frustrations and current situation. The gangs raised issues about political corruption and absence of opportunities including educational and job opportunities. The gang leaders lamented the soaring cost of living as a major issue affecting their abilities to live dignified lives. Their submissions suggest that their engagements into political violence or electoral violence is mainly due to the incentives they receive from political stakeholders. They recalled that during the 2018 elections for instance, some of them were mobilized and camped as standby forces for political party stakeholders to commit atrocities during internal party issues and national political issues. During such period, food, shelter, alcohol, and some petty cash are usually given to the participants to sustain their wellbeing. The gang leaders also reported that the cash incentives are usually the equivalent of about 200 USD often provided to their gang leadership nicknamed ‘Five O’ to be distributed to other members. The hierarchy of the criminal gang structure is such that the leadership is held in high respect and followers are even prepared to lay down their lives in defense of the criminal gang. Thus, the gang kingpins noted that their followers would usually accept any sum received from their kingpins out of desperation due to their dire economic situation.

Another aspect of the social change initiative was the dissemination of peace flyers to popularize electoral activities and remind the public about the need to promote peace. During the election’s registration period, a flyer was designed with a message in the local parlance which reads: ‘go register for vote from the 3rd Sept to 4th Oct, 2022’. The flyer reached an estimated audience of about a thousand individuals at home and abroad including gang kingpins and their members. These flyers were circulated on various social media handles including Facebook, twitter, and LinkedIn. The flyers were also redistributed on various social media handles again and again to further expand their reach. I requested one hundred of my very close friends to circulate them on their various social media handles by the gang kingpins to their networks.

Furthermore, on the 2nd September, 2022 which is recognized globally as the International Day of Peace, a peace flyer was also circulated to these same group of close friends and the gang kingpins to be recirculated to their networks targeting an audience of about a thousand people. The flyer was designed to increase public awareness about this important day and to remember those trapped in armed conflicts across the globe.

**3.2. Impacts of the Interventions**

The civic education and youth empowerment or mentoring programs are implemented to minimize political crimes, promote voter registration and verification exercises among criminal gangs and the public in the targeted communities. The positive impacts should continue even beyond the lifespan of the SCI based on follow up activities and the productive partnerships with local stakeholders also engaged in non-violence campaigns throughout the elections process.

There was a drop in political crime rates in the targeted communities which also hosted a registration centers. Throughout the registration period, there was no report of violence during the registration process in the targeted communities even though these communities are usually prone to spontaneous violence including electoral violence. There were few political tensions in registration centers within the targeted constituencies mainly originating from disagreement over registration procedures. However, these minor disagreements did not attract the use of political thugs to cause conflicts. The commitment by gangs to refrain from political violence coupled with the engagements and security presence ensured that criminal gangs had limited opportunities to mobilize, plan and execute political violence. The reduction in crimes related to voter registration suggests that the civic education may have contributed to reduce the violence among vulnerable youths or criminal gang members living in violent neighborhoods. It also suggests that the criminal gang kingpins identified to be the target group are influential and have control over their followers. They succeeded in persuading their fans to refrain from political violence throughout the voter registration process in the targeted communities.

Additionally, the civic education may have contributed to an increased in voter registration awareness and possibly turnout in the targeted constituencies. While this outcome may not only be attributed to the initiative given that a lot of sensitizations was ongoing, but it should also be noted that this success demonstrates an increased commitment to participate in political processes and by extension in decision making processes, which are fundamental elements of good governance in a democratic dispensation. Many more citizens have realized that the only sustainable way to effect political change or determine political leadership is through by the ballot box and not by using bullets or violence.

As mentioned earlier, the criminal gang kingpins targeted used their influence to persuade their members/structures to participate peacefully in the voter registration and verification process. This means that target group were convinced that this action is the right thing to do. Criminal gangs can as well participate in civic process without external influence when they are convinced; contrasting popular perceptions that gangs, youths need to be given financial rewards by political party stakeholders to participate in electoral processes.

The social change initiative also introduced the participants to an important learning platform where they can access various rich content with just data and a smart phone at hand. By introducing them to business opportunities or the idea of craftmanship, the SCI could have contributed to inspire self-reliance among those who venture into the proposed economic activities. The SCI also demonstrated how networking is extremely important in marketing or the conduct of business activities. Thus, the participants were encouraged to form networks to start small activities including collection of plastic wastes, scrap metals or even garbage in their respective communities to earn much needed cash to enhance their livelihoods.

The results suggest that meaningful engagements with youths and/or violent youth kingpins not only minimizes violent conduct, but it could also inspire gang members to engage in productive activities towards enhancing their livelihoods and promote national interests. In summary, such interventions for vulnerable youths can impact behavior while functioning at lower costs due to the relatively short program period.

Furthermore, the initiative provided an opportunity to listen to the concerns of the vulnerable members of society who have been negatively impacted by historic legacies of marginalization against young people. I was shocked as to capabilities of these individuals to articulate their felt needs and this experience changed my perception about these individuals. They gang members were able to explain how the governance structure is mostly designed to create opportunities (including jobs and other basic amenities) for educated people in society and these educated people continue to use them (gang members) for their selfish interests including advancing their political goals. While these views could be subjective, they demonstrate awareness of challenges in the public sector and a growing resentment against the elites in the public administration. The feedbacks reinforce the interlinks between poor governance and insecurity and will be given due policy consideration in the design and implementation of human security programs.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**4.0. General Conclusion**

Electoral violence is a sub-set of political violence that constitutes a threat to Sierra Leone’s democratic credentials and post-conflict peacebuilding progress. As a developing nation, Sierra Leone already has the bitter experience of a civil conflict and its dire humanitarian consequences. Although ethno-regional issues did not play a major role in fueling the civil conflict, Sierra Leone’s current political landscape is largely shaped by ethnic and regional dimensions which translate into intolerance mostly during elections period. This negative trend needs to be critically examined from a broader perspective to fully understand the nature of the problem, its manifestation and impacts for sustainable development.

This initiative has successfully demonstrated that there is room for improvement to consolidate Sierra Leone’s democratic credentials. The report has also shown that the vulnerability of criminal gangs is mostly exploited to perpetrate political violence by desperate politicians with weak political messages or strategy that resonates with the electorates. The engagements have uncovered a popular sentiment among vulnerable gang members which point to long-standing legacies of political deceit, manipulations, political corruption, or abuse of office as issues that remain a major concern in Sierra Leone. The use of violence is mostly to intimidate opponents and intimidate innocent members of the public with the aim of influencing political outcomes, neutralize opponents and settle long-standing political or social vendetta.

The initiative has enhanced my experience as a security operative on how effective community engagements including community policing builds confidence in the security sector, enhances greater participation and could also become an effective anti-violence tool to enhance community safety. The engagements with youth clusters have shown that the perpetrators and victims of electoral violence are open to constructive dialogue about ending electoral violence and transforming them into useful citizens. These engagements have also underscored the need to popularize positive peace messages as part of an overall strategy to promote peacebuilding.

**4.1. Recommendations/Implications for Policy**

The report shows that in a democratic dispensation, the youths also want to benefit from the national wealth and governance mechanism of the country. This means that the inclusion of vulnerable youths in meaningful socioeconomic and political programs is critical because they can also contribute towards peace, security, and national development. The need to promote tolerance in the public space cannot be overemphasized. Vulnerable youths should not be abandoned as a bye-product of society, they must be given opportunities to express their views on issues that affect them.

Additionally, the report reveals that violent gang activities in communities is a bye-product of poor parenting and weak government policies to comprehensively address the problems of youth bulge in Sierra Leone. Parents have a critical role to play to educate and raise kids to become useful citizens. Most of the gang kingpins debriefed, mentioned the lack of funding to pursue education beyond the compulsory and free basic level. This suggests an inadequate parental planning that disregards the long-term economic implications of having kids; thus, suggesting that stakeholders including religious leaders need to invest more efforts into parental counselling programs. Besides, these gang members also lack technical and vocational skills for job creation which suggests that government needs to invest more in affordable vocational and technical education programs to absorb the large number of young people who cannot afford to pursue educational goals beyond the basic level.

The initiative also illustrates that the current trends of political tensions and violence is a problem that can be addressed not just with the ‘stick’ approach (which emphasis arrests and incarcerations), but also with the requisite political will to promote civic education programs targeting vulnerable youths who are victims and perpetrators. The constructive engagements and conversations during the implementation of the initiative has shown that the are dividends when vulnerable youths are meaningfully engaged with the right investment of time and resources. This could significantly minimize political violence in the national politics of Sierra Leone is on the increase.

Furthermore, the findings have shown that promoting democracy or greater participation should be rooted in programs to address poverty and marginalization. The welfare of every citizen should be prioritized otherwise, if the national cake does not benefit every citizen or there is a feeling of marginalization, the real impacts of democracy will not be felt. Thus, government and development partners should invest more into poverty alleviation programs targeting vulnerable communities to enhance their resilience and capacity to effectively participate in political and economic activities. The engagements have demonstrated that the criminal gangs view the political class as corrupt and greedy and only provide incentives to vulnerable youths during political activities or when their services are needed to for political intimidation or elections violence. This means that while the youths appreciate the end of the civil conflict and the advent of democracy, they strongly believe that governance mostly benefits the elites or the political class more than any other group. Therefore, while we seek to consolidate our democratic credentials, there is need to prioritize citizens welfare by instituting policies that will make goods and services affordable.

**4.2. Sustainability plan**

Project sustainability is the ability to achieve desired outcomes and maintain those achievements through a systematic implementation of the project over a period. Considering the foregoing, sustainable development in social change initiative is expected to expand the perimeter or scope of the project by increasing the temporal vision and scope to expand the successes. It is about balancing or harmonizing social, environmental, and economic demands of the project. For this initiative, the strategy to sustain the impacts will focus on sustaining the resources including securing additional financial and human resources to be used during and after implementation of the social change initiative. Emphasis will be laid on sustaining the core activities of the project or initiative to address electoral violence and provide mentoring, coaching and youth engagement platforms with the support of local partners.

The field work creates rooms for coaching, mentoring, and training on civil education with little incentives attached to cascade the messages to gang membership in partnership with another Rotary Peace Fellow running a community-based organization on youth empowerment. This organization will institutionalize these activities and continue to follow up on these such programs to ensure that the sustainability of the project. The researcher will work with partners firstly to review the strategies and evaluate the success of the project to identify gaps to be addressed going forward.

Ongoing funding or resources are important aspect of sustainability and efforts will be made to mobilize human and material resources from stakeholders in the community or community members against the backdrop that the local communities are usually most adversely affected by political violence and efforts to promote peace and mentor criminal gangs will be in the community’s best interest. The project will solicit human resources from respected local leaders including religious leaders to give peace talks during subsequent engagements. The project will create a platform where criminal gangs that are mostly neglected as useless elements in society, will have a conversation with stakeholders in their community to express their dissatisfaction and seek solutions to their problems. The successes of the project or social change initiative will be popularized using various platforms including social media to attract attention of members of the public including stakeholders. Criminal gangs will be involved in popularizing the successes of the initiative by capturing key highlights, concerns, resolutions, and commitments of these criminal gangs. By popularizing these activities, public attention will be drawn to an important issue affecting national security and development. This strategy will serve as the basis to convince well-meaning citizens to invest time and resources to sustain these efforts.

The sustainability of the project requires a productive partnership with the local leaders and community-based organizations. The initiative was implemented with the support of members of local community-based organizations (CBO’s). These CBO’s provided useful advice and support to identify and support gang kingpins in the targeted communities. Apparently, one of the key partners also running a community-based youth organization is a Rotary Peace Fellow from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand whose name is Mohamed Kanneh. The initiative tapped into the experience and expertise of this Fellow to help identify beneficiaries and implement the project. This partnership is expected to extend the lifespan of the civic education and sustain the momentum as Sierra Leone approaches elections.

Additionally, the presence of the social media presents an opportunity to sustain the civic education programs online. On a periodic basis, even beyond the lifespan of the initiative, the researcher has been using various social media platforms to disseminate and share messages of peace. These messages will outlive the initiative’s timeframe and continually educate and encourage many more young people on their civic responsibilities. The social media will also present an opportunity to attract funding and other material support to the project among the researcher’s network circles.

Furthermore, the initiative is linked to a strategic objective of government’s national policy for youth empowerment. It is expected that national government policies on youth empowerment will have a positive effect on youth activities or programs at the local level and contribute towards addressing youth vulnerability. Thus, the positive effects of national policies will have a positive effect on the local activities by shaping opinions. The factors that are expected to link and sustain the initiative are political support demonstrated through advocacy for increased budgetary support for youth-empowerment programs, organization of youth clusters to create a unified structure capable of attracting external support and participation or ownership of the initiative by the gang kingpins. The initiative has created two youth clusters with capacity to articulate their felt needs and set goals to attract external support. This visioning and ability to set goals is essential to stimulate participation, conflict resolution and consensus building. This has the potential to direct collective action towards addressing an issue of collective interest or to achieve a common goal.

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**APPENDICES**

**Photos of sessions with gang kingpins, co-facilitators (partners)**

A group of people sitting in chairs

Description automatically generated with medium confidence(above-left to right:Ernest Lissa- coordinator of a community base organisation, Augustine J.Koroma-RPF and Mohamed Kanneh RPF from Chula University ) A group of people sitting in a room

Description automatically generated

(above) Ernest Lissa-coordinator of a local NGO giving a peace talk to gang leaders

A group of people sitting in chairs

Description automatically generated with medium confidence (above) Augustine J. Koroma explaining the pillars of positive peace as well as soliciting response from participants

Logo

Description automatically generated with low confidence

(above) a flyer in the local krio language popularizing elections registration viewed by 44 participants/followers