Child rights in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has experienced steady improvement in security and political stability since a decade of armed conflict ended in 2002. Peaceful national democratic elections were held in 2007, and efforts to strengthen government institutions and promote reconciliation are being pursued. Economic growth returned during the post-conflict period, averaging about 7.7 per cent per year between 2003 and 2007, driven mostly by the agriculture and mining sectors.


Protecting children while restoring security

The Child Rights Act forms the basis of a stronger framework for protecting child rights. However, the road to its implementation is long. The country still lags in economic, social and human development. Although richly endowed with mineral resources, Sierra Leone ranked at the bottom of 177 countries and territories in the United Nations Development Programme’s most recent Human Development Index. It has been strongly affected by the 2008-2009 global economic downturn, which has curtailed financial flows to the country from trade, investment, remittances and aid. Sierra Leone has also been listed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as one of the countries most vulnerable to food insecurity.

The country’s maternal and under-five mortality rates are the highest in the world, and nearly 40 per cent of children under five suffer from moderate or severe stunting. Basic and maternal health facilities and services and environmental health infrastructure are in short supply. One third of infants do not receive routine immunization in the form of three doses of diphtheria, pertussis and tetanus toxoid vaccine. Nearly 60 per cent of women deliver without the assistance of a skilled health attendant. Almost half of Sierra Leoneans have no access to improved drinking-water facilities, and roughly 7 in every 10 citizens are without adequate sanitation facilities. More than 30 per cent of children of primary-school-age are not enrolled in school, and there are moderate transition rates from primary school to secondary and tertiary education. Barriers to girls’ education include child marriage – 62 per cent of girls marry before age 18, and 27 per cent before age 15 – and high levels of adolescent pregnancy.

During the past two decades, Sierra Leone has faced obstacles in promoting and protecting the rights of its children. Conflict, poverty, gender inequities and discriminatory cultural practices combine to undermine child rights. Despite the return of democracy and greater political stability in Sierra Leone, girls and women are still exposed to sexual violence, along with harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting. More than 90 per cent of women aged 15–49 are estimated to have undergone FGM/C.

During the decade-long civil conflict, children were recruited by both government and rebel forces. The Special Court for Sierra Leone, set up to try those responsible for the most serious violations of human rights, convicted all nine defendants – including former president Charles Taylor – of recruiting children to fight as combatants. Three defendants have been convicted of forcing marriage on girls and women, marking the first time that a court has upheld such a charge.

Sierra Leone is making strides to increase children’s participation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Sierra Leone, established to create an impartial documentation of human rights violations, has involved children in the process and given special attention to the experiences of children affected by the civil strife. In the same spirit, in 2001 the Government of Sierra Leone formed the Children’s Forum Network, a child-to-child advocacy organization committed to creating linkages and spreading knowledge on child rights and responsibilities. The Children’s Forum Network is currently working in all of Sierra Leone’s 13 districts.

Challenges ahead

To make meaningful advances on child survival and development, the Government of Sierra Leone, in partnership with other stakeholders, faces the challenge of scaling up such essential services as immunization, micronutrient supplementation, maternal, newborn and child health care, quality education and environmental health facilities, and developing a national child protection system. These advances require continued stability and peace, and an environment supportive of the rights of women and children. Establishing and maintaining political stability and security throughout the West and Central Africa region will therefore be critical to realizing the rights of children in Sierra Leone and its neighbours during the years ahead.

See References, pages 90–92.