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REMINISCENCE OF EDUCATION IN POST-WAR YEARS: SIERRA LEONE AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The main **purposes** of this paper are as follows: (I) to provide a historical narrative of Sierra Leone's educational system, (II) to assess the impact of war on the country's educational system and pace of development in the current digital age, and finally, (III) to offer some discourses for policy dialogue in embracing the developmental landscape of the country.

Methodology. The study is based on a "narrative" approach to exploring the outcomes of the civil war that resulted in the complete disruption of the education system in Sierra Leone.

Results. The outcome of the study, which utilizes a narrative methodological approach, has captured pertinent areas of concern regarding the destructive legacy that the civil war brought to the country. Notable among these is the complete collapse of standards in the education system and, even more notably, the emergence of fake educational institutions. The results also draw attention to the positives of free education in creating equality in access to education for all.

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Conclusions. *The study outcome shows that Sierra Leone is making some steady progress in providing an inclusive education for that despite the bad memory that the civil war brought to the entire nation. Moving on, the study outcome noted that progress needs to be made in terms of embracing modern technology to address emerging developments in areas pertaining to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and many more. Also, to resurrect the country to its earlier glory of high educational standards, efforts must be made to raise the profile of those responsible for delivering the curriculum (teachers in particular), while at the same time ensuring high quality of graduates are made to enter through competitive salaries.*

KEYWORDS: *Post-war, Educational Challenges, Education and Development, Structural Change, Sierra Leone.*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Sierra Leone has been praised for being one of the first countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) to experience a westernized type of education modeled on the curriculum of classical education, which typically includes subjects such as History, Geography, Latin, Greek, and more, in addition to the core curriculum of the English Language, Mathematics, and Sciences (incorporating Biology, Chemistry, and Physics). Due to this, the country was widely known over the years as the "Athens of West Africa," which signifies its specialization in classical education (Warburton, 2021).

The continued influence of bad governance over the years destroyed the fabric of high-quality education that people used to enjoy, even after independence in the early 1960s. Most importantly, during the latter part of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the economy was in such a state that the World Bank implemented the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) to address some of the problems of poor macroeconomic management (Jackson, & Jabbie, 2020).

Despite the good intent of the program as outlined by the World Bank, it was not well equipped to address the challenges of poverty and the tight fiscal space in which

the country was already placed. The severity of the economic crisis was also revealed during this period, particularly in the late 1980s, with the intervention of the rebel incursion by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Foday Sankoh.

This period was considered highly traumatizing for the entire nation, especially with its impact on the collapse of the country's entire educational system. The long-lasting nature of the civil crisis damaged every aspect of economic life, leading to the complete closure of the educational system and the recruitment of many young boys as armed fighters, as a way of prolonging the battle and the intentions of the rebel fighters (Gberie, 2005).

In view of the above simplified introduction, the main objectives of this paper are as follows: (i) to provide a historical overview of Sierra Leone's educational system, (ii) to assess the impact of war on the country's educational system and pace of development in the current digital age; and finally, (iii) to offer some suggestions for policy discussions in embracing the developmental landscape of the country.

Moving forward, the rest of the paper will be structured as follows: Section Two addresses the pre-war narrative of education in Sierra Leone, while Section

Three provides a narrative of the methodology. Section Four deals with the Results. This section is divided into sub-sections that cover the impact of the war on the education system, the post-war restructuring of the education system, inclusivity and expansion, and a critical discourse on the contested terrain of present-day developments. Section Five concludes by offering some policy suggestions for developing the country's education system to meet international education demands.

Pre-War Narrative of Education in Sierra Leone

The education system in Sierra Leone prior to the civil crisis in the late 1980s was characterized by a well-established standard modeled on the colonial system. It began with kindergarten or preschool and progressed through primary, secondary, and higher education, which was divided into vocational (technical institutions) and college or university level.

As previously mentioned, Sierra Leone was once known as the "Athens of West Africa" due to its strong emphasis on classical education and its curriculum that included subjects such as Greek and Latin, as well as traditional academic subjects such as History, Geography, and the core subjects of English Language, Mathematics, and Sciences (incorporating Biology, Chemistry, and Physics). This was aimed at preparing students for professional careers, such as law and civil service administration.

As already stressed, before 1993, the educational curriculum in Sierra Leone was modeled strictly on the United Kingdom system. Students spent seven years in primary school (Classes 1-7), and successful performance on the selective entrance exam would automatically mean progression into secondary school.

Success on the end of the primary education exam was a sufficient criterion for acceptance into a secondary school, while higher grades were necessary to be accepted into the top standard schools such as the Sierra Leone Grammar School, Prince of Wales, Annie Walsh, and St. Joseph's Convent. The basic secondary education was a five-year stage (Forms 1-5) during which students prepared to take the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level examination, typically in Form 5 with some exceptions for Form 4 students. To progress to Sixth Form, a student needed to have at least five GCE O Level credits, with a minimum of a credit in English and Mathematics and three other credits, including a science subject such as Biology or Health Science.

The Sixth Form education was a two-year stage, with Lower and Upper Six, where students focused on three specialist subjects. University entry was based on a student obtaining at least two Ds on the Advanced Level examination. Both the O and A Level exams were administered by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and were equivalent to any UK school exam, as verified by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC) board for all overseas qualifications.

With the need to reform the education system to meet the challenges of a globalized education system and to address market needs that require a combination of middle-skilled labor and academics, there was a call for revision of the education system. This led to the emergence of the 6-3-3-4 curriculum in 1993.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a narrative approach in addressing the topic, which is based on a descriptive approach that involves detailed and critical concepts related to

the emergence of the civil war that resulted in a complete collapse of the educational system in Sierra Leone (Sauro, 2013). The methodology captures a sequence of events since the colonial period, epitomized by the time when the country was under British control.

RESULTS

Impact of the war on educational fabrics

Due to the state of the educational system in Sierra Leone, it is evident that the impact of the civil war has been extremely detrimental to the nation's developmental progress. The war destroyed the education infrastructure across the country and shattered Sierra Leone's status as the 'Athens of West Africa.'

The Sierra Leone civil war was one of the most brutal conflicts Africa has witnessed, resulting in the deaths of over 50,000 people and the displacement of half a million in a nation with a population of under 3 million at the time of the war (Bonvin, & Galster, 2010). The war devastated the education system, which continues to affect every aspect of development in the nation's economy. During the conflict, girls were subjected to torture and rape, while children of all genders were kidnapped and forced into slavery. Educational institutions were destroyed and many teachers fled, never to return. Schools and higher education facilities were burned, resulting in a near halt to education in some areas throughout the war (Matsumoto, 2018).

A serious issue that continues to affect education in Sierra Leone, which is a result of the war, is the challenge to girls' education. Although girls' access to education is improving, class completion remains low with high dropout rates and consistently low enrollment in secondary school. Early pregnancy, gender-based violence, child marriage, and cultural

biases perpetuate the cycle of gender inequality. (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2012).

Post-war Structuring of the Education System: Inclusivity and Expansion

The aftermath of the civil war saw tremendous efforts by successive governments to push forward with the transformation of educational provision across the country. This was particularly evident in the early 2000s when legal enactments were instituted to effect changes in educational provision. Schools across the country were ranked based on their outputs and specializations to cater to the needs of a growing workforce. Notable among these efforts was the need to ensure that school qualifications were well-suited to meet international standards, as outlined in the revised 6-3-3-4 school curriculum.

The establishment of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) was a result of an enactment aimed at improving higher education provision. With the support of then-president Ahmed Tejan Kabba, the goal was to expand higher education access. This eventually led to the separation of Njala University College from the University of Sierra Leone in 2005 and its rebranding as Njala University. The university was granted the authority to establish its own university court system to oversee education standards and delivery. In an effort to align education with sustainable development, new and privately managed institutions were established to address the shortage of higher education options in regional towns across the country.

Recalling, a range of projects were championed soon after the end of the civil war to restore the country's education standard to its acclaimed status as the "Athens of West Africa." Notable highlights include cross-border education and local

community school projects (Kawar, 2011). The cross-border project, which trains teachers and school managers, was developed to target the high number of out-of-school children in border regions.

Beneficiaries, whose families were killed by rebels during the war, expressed appreciation for the project, particularly in terms of managing children's behavior. This includes keeping them safe in school and developing productive teaching activities to enhance students' concentration levels. A specific citation of the pleasurable benefits gained is mentioned here: "I want the children to become good people, better people for tomorrow. That is why I am teaching them," said Mr. Josiah. "When I see children that I have taught and they are moving on to higher levels of education, I feel proud of that" (Galanek, 2011).

Contested Terrain of Present-day Developments

Despite the progress that has been made in transforming the education system since the end of the civil war, there are still concerns about what needs to be done to bring it to an international standard. Credit should be given to recent governments for addressing these issues and making changes, as evidenced by the establishment of new educational institutions (both schools and higher education) to ensure access to education does not limit citizens' opportunities for advancement. The goal of improving education for prosperity has been emphasized by nearly all ruling political parties as a means of restoring the high-quality educational standards that existed before the rebel insurgency of the late 1980s broke out.

Credit is due to the efforts made to transform the education system in Sierra Leone after the end of the civil war. The

implementation of the free education system by the SLPP government in 2018 is a notable achievement. Although there have been some challenges in the system, such as funding constraints and the need for improved resources, the introduction of free education has sparked hope for addressing gaps in the educational system. With this system in place, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are now able to access free education during their compulsory years (5-18), which helps to close the gap on the high illiteracy rates that have long been a concern in Sierra Leone according to the human development index indicator (World Bank, 2020). Now, children in all state schools are able to take free public exams, helping them move on to the next stage of their lives.

Contrary to the aforementioned positive progress made in the educational system after the civil crisis, there are still numerous concerns that continue to negatively impact the sector. Such problems include, but are not limited to, poor standards of management in the school administration system and low morale among state-managed schools, largely due to low salaries that do not keep up with inflationary pressures across the country.

As one might expect, there seems to be a lack of relevance in the skills and understanding of graduates when it comes to addressing the needs of the market, in part due to poor monitoring of quality assurance (QA) in the higher education system in many state-owned universities. The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), which is responsible for overseeing QA and accreditation, has also been lagging in its efforts. This lack of effective monitoring has even led to the widespread use of fake degrees by some citizens to gain employment (Barrie, 2022),

a result of the economic turmoil brought on by the civil crisis and the resulting scarcity of job opportunities in the country.

While the emergence of private and newly upgraded higher education institutions has improved standards and increased competition in the educational sector, there are still challenges that prevent the country from competing in the international ranking of institutions. In the present age of technological advancement, the goal of making education the pathway to growth in the country is to ensure that high investment is made in critical areas such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and that these are at the core of the policy agenda for successive governments. To keep up with the pace of technological advancement in the 21st century, leaders in the country, especially political leaders and institutional leaders in higher education institutions, need to address the Sustainable Development Goals (Jackson, Jackson, & Jackson, 2020).

Also noteworthy in the area of contested terrain or setbacks of the civil crisis, but which needs to be addressed in contemporary discussions pertaining to the development of an educational standard in Sierra Leone, is progress towards producing high-calibre teacher training graduates. Teacher training is a cross-cutting issue, and education standards still face a plethora of challenges, as already highlighted since the post-war period, albeit to a lesser extent. Over two decades after the official end of the war, the country is still grappling with the following realities:

- Training of more women teachers;
- Push towards the training of high calibre and qualified teachers;

- Even out the geographical distribution of qualified teachers – due to the advantage of better facilities in the capital city (Freetown), qualified graduates are seeking voluntarily moving out of rural communities to seek greener pastures in the city;
- Setting measures to address high teacher attrition;
- Address equitable salaries to attract teachers into the classroom;
- The normalisation of the ghost worker system for un-identified teachers on the payroll.

Many of the above-mentioned problems in the education system—such as low-quality education, high teacher-pupil ratios (especially in rural and remote areas), widespread corruption (even on a small scale), and unequal geographical access, quality, and retention in education—appear to be linked to the poor standard of living faced by the people in the country. This also results in low motivation and the attraction of people with low caliber and fake qualifications earned from unaccredited institutions to the teaching profession.

DISCUSSION

In the current information age, driven by the high demand for virtual services, efforts must be made to restructure the education system to ensure that school and university curricula are focused on addressing essential areas of Information Technology skills to bridge the skills gap in the market. Investment in education is crucial to ensure learners have access to a range of educational services, including virtual methods of teaching and learning like WhatsApp to accommodate flexible modes of assessment (Jackson, 2020).

Conscious efforts must be made by successive governments to capacitate

high-quality educational provision in the country. The SLPP regime has made some positive steps in improving education standards by providing free education to primary and secondary schools nationwide. However, there remains a critical aspect to how the delivery of free education can improve standards, which in turn will help to restore the country's reputation as the "Athens of West Africa". Providing free, quality education is a commendable goal for a country like Sierra Leone, which is still grappling with high poverty rates as a result of the aftermath of a decade of civil war and, to some extent, a poorly managed civil service that undermines the delivery of high-quality education (Jackson, 2020a).

CONCLUSIONS

Going forward, there is much to be considered in order to erase the negative memories of the civil crisis from the minds of people. The world operates as a global economy, and Sierra Leone is making steady progress towards improving its profile through education, as championed in the manifesto of the SLPP regime. Most notably, the provision of free education to all school-aged children is making a positive impact, particularly in terms of removing a significant financial burden from parents who cannot afford to pay for their children's education. However, it is also crucial to verify qualifications, whether earned in Sierra Leone or overseas, in order to minimize the risk of employing individuals who are not suitably qualified.

Despite efforts by the government to minimize corruption, there are still remnants of unscrupulous teachers and lecturers in the education profession who persist in engaging in corrupt acts, such as accepting bribes from students to meet their personal needs. This is particularly

evident during examination periods, where teachers and perpetrators throughout the country are known to engage in corrupt practices, such as distributing exam questions to students. On some occasions, students are made to enter private rooms where specialists will answer questions for them as a way to help them meet the admission requirements for universities or other institutions of higher education.

The way forward on this issue is to set standards and, more importantly, as previously stated, to adjust salaries to meet the current standard or cost of living across the country. With the current state of shock that the global economy is facing, the situation is only going to worsen, as teachers' salaries are insufficient to cover the cost of a week's worth of meals for a family of three to four people. Thus, adjustments need to be made to ensure that salary structures are in line with the current cost of living, which will eventually help to attract only highly qualified and capable graduate teachers to the profession.

It is also important to emphasize the need for monitoring teacher delivery and depth of knowledge to be made a critical component of their ongoing professional development. Education, in general, is evolving, and attention must be focused on ensuring that the quality of delivery across the curriculum at all levels, from schools to universities, is aligned with international best practices. Despite the legacy of the disastrous effects of the civil war on the country, it is still possible to revive positive hope for the future by doing things the right way. Professionals, particularly heads of institutions, should strive to monitor the quality of delivery and standards of those responsible for shaping the future generations of learners.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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АНОТАЦІЯ / ABSTRACT [in Ukrainian]:

РЕМІНІСЦЕНЦІЯ ОСВІТИ В ПІСЛЯВОЄННІ РОКИ: СЬЄРРА-ЛЕОНЕ ЯК ПРИКЛАД

Основні **цілі** статті: (1) надати історичний виклад про освітню систему Сьєрра-Леоне, (2) оцінити вплив війни на освітню систему країни та темпи її розвитку в сучасну епоху цифрових технологій, і, нарешті, (3) запропонувати деякі дискурси для політичного діалогу щодо сприйняття ландшафту розвитку країни.

Методологія. Дослідження базується на «нарративному» підході до вивчення наслідків громадянської війни, яка призвела до повного руйнування системи освіти в Сьєрра-Леоне.

Результати. Результати дослідження, у якому використовується нарративний методологічний підхід, охопили відповідні галузі, які викликають занепокоєння щодо руйнівної спадщини, яку принесла країні громадянська війна. Серед них варто відзначити повний крах стандартів у системі освіти і, що ще більш помітно, появу фальшивих навчальних закладів. Результати також привертають увагу до переваг безкоштовної освіти у створенні рівності в доступі всіх до освіти.

Висновки. Результати дослідження показують, що Сьєрра-Леоне досягає стабільного прогресу в забезпеченні інклюзивної освіти, для цього, незважаючи на погані наслідки громадянської війни, які залишилися для всієї нації. Далі, у висновках дослідження зазначено, що необхідно досягти прогресу в застосуванні сучасних технологій для вирішення нових розробок у сфері штучного інтелекту (ШІ) та багатьох інших. Крім того, щоб відродити країну до колишньої слави високих освітніх стандартів, необхідно докласти зусиль для підвищення авторитету всіх, хто відповідає за виконання навчальної програми (зокрема вчителів), водночас забезпечуючи високу якість випускників для вступу за рахунок конкурентоспроможної заробітної плати.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА: післявоєнний період, освітні виклики, освіта та розвиток, структурні зміни, Сьєрра-Леоне.

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