

Sierra Leone: Part One [Momo Turay]

1. Give a brief general description of the disaster that you are reporting on.

a. Name Sierra Leone Civil Conflict

b. Place West coast of Africa/West African Sub Region/Mano River Basin

c. Time 1991- 2002.

d. General effects An estimated 50,000 people (men, women and children of various ages) lost their lives; massive displacement of more than half the entire population (2.6 million estimated) nationwide internally into Displaced camps (Warehouses, school buildings, garages, tarpaulins and 'thatched-made' structures among other makeshift structures) and internationally to neighboring countries into refugee camps of similar nature; wanton destruction of public property especially police stations, court buildings, hospitals, schools etc; malnutrition (little or no food production, aid agencies were unable to distribute food due to insecurity); unhealthy population (hospitals were non-functional, limited medical personnel); less economic activity (government and state apparatus were more concerned with aid and relief other than production activities).

The entire population became displaced with estimate put around 2.6 million with large internally Displaced camps set up in public buildings (Stadium, School, warehouses, factory buildings etc); refugee camps in neighboring countries; destruction of state institutions like courts, police, hospital, schools; insufficient food (less farming activity therefore less production; aid agencies like World Food Programme-WFP were overwhelmed); insufficient medical personnel to respond to the increasing needs of the population including supplies and even the humanitarian agencies found it difficult to respond to the challenges; environmental degradation and destruction-clearing of forest reserves and protected areas for habitation and dependence on the natural resources for survival.

Children separated from their parents, recruited as child soldiers, sex slaves, girl-mothers, most of the children were very ill (anemic, malnourished, and sexually transmitted disease -- gonorrhoea, syphilis, etc).

The failure by the military to stop rebel advances and the misinformation that attributed such failures to survivors as 'agents' for and sympathetic to the rebels led to mistrust within communities and the persecution of survivors, particularly young men. Human rights abuses by the military junta and the rebels were rife.

2. Describe the disaster area where you worked.

a. Place I was a student at Njala University and had to relocate to the capital Freetown to complete my studies as many students' survivors did. Upon graduation, I stayed in Freetown and volunteered for Defense for Children International (DCI) working on child rights issues especially children affected by the war. Like Momo, I (Amadu) had to relocate from Njala where I served as an academic/ethnographer at Njala University to the capital city, Freetown when the campus fell to the rebels. I continued my tenure there, but the relentless human rights abuses by both the military junta and the rebels spurred me and others to take practical steps to set up the National League for Human Rights and Democracy (NLHRD) and to join the editorial team of *For Di People*, an independent human rights newspaper. Our intention was to expose and

challenge the atrocities and advocate for the restoration of multi-party democracy and peaceful resolution of the war. I should highlight that for me and Momo, this is the start of our agency in our own recovery! As victims and survivors of the war, we put our lives and resources at risk to give us a sense of purpose, to help ourselves and others to cope with the desperate situation.

b. Time In 1991, the rebels attacked the border areas of Kailahun and Pujehun District (South-Eastern) of Sierra Leone. The entire rural population was displaced moving into urban centres for safety. Within 5 years, the entire country has been engulfed in the conflict. Many more fled as refugees to neighbouring countries and elsewhere. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) intervened to stop the armed insurrection by 1992. The International community helped to initiate democracy as a means of restoring normalcy in 1996. In 1998, a group of fresh university graduates subscribed to DCI for a local section in Sierra Leone. This was approved and we immediately intervened on behalf of children affected by the war (child soldiers, abandoned kids, street kids, and physically challenged among others)

c. General effects

Large numbers of people (5,000 people) were killed, massive displacement (between 10-12, 000) from Njala to other towns and cities (Bo and Freetown). The University and other educational institutions including schools were torched leading to a halt in their activities; hospitals were sacked and looted of medical supplies; food supplies cut –off; transportation and communication disrupted; and all normal activities came to a halt.

The greatest effect was the closing of the university making students, academic and other staff to flee the Njala community and its environs. The area became cut-off from the rest of the country.

The displaced and Sierra Leonean returnees from Liberia continued to be treated with suspicion, mistrust and inhumanely. Mistrust between the rebels and elected government, military and government, and among sections of the military. The military, politics and other state institutions became polarized along ethnic divide. The civil war ravaged and the rise of the 'sobels', meaning some rogue elements of the military sided with the rebel forces to attack civilians that led to most of the country being occupied by the rebels. This undermined the legitimacy of the fragile civilian government. There was summary justice, revenge attacks by an embattled military and freedom of speech was muffled. Large emigration among the intellectual and professional class.

3. Describe your initial knowledge of the afflicted community.

Children were the most affected. They were forced to become child soldiers, used as sex slaves and to transport loots, were abandoned, orphaned and malnourished, and suffered from illness and untimely deaths. A group of us volunteered to intervene after the January 6, 1999 attack on Freetown, initially to campaign against the use of child soldiers by all sides in the conflict, then to rehabilitation and reintegration of children into mainstream society. As the security situation improved, we broaden our scope of work to include juvenile justice, rehabilitation of 'girl mothers' (girls abducted by fighting forces who became mothers), caring for them and their children. Most of these children were from the rural areas where the conflict had the hardest hit.

Most of their parents were either killed, maimed and in some cases went in different directions when fighting broke out and never re-united with their children.

Both of us have 'insider' knowledge of the situation in Sierra Leone. We are born and lived in the country, and witness the start of the war and lived most of it. Indeed, we are victims, survivors in some ways. We were displaced, experienced political repression, and know someone who has either been killed, raped, mutilated and jailed by parties to the conflict. We also know key perpetrators of these atrocities.

Prior to the war, we had little knowledge of working with survivors of humanitarian disasters including children and war related trauma issues. We basically intervened on the basis of our human rights instincts and humanitarian drive.

3a. How did you get to know the survivors?

Due to our work and our involvement in the existing networks that was seeking to support the affected population, we became a point of call for children issues and in most cases we went to police stations and children holding centers including the court to intervene on issues of those in conflict with the law (loitering, pilfering, street kids). It was very easy to identify the most vulnerable ones within any setting-in displaced camps, they were often found at communal places; in the urban towns, at the motor parks, market areas and other public places-football fields, parks, etc.

I (Amadu) got to know many survivors through my human rights activism and journalism and focused on documenting and reporting on atrocities committed by the rebels, military and politicians. I initially approached the survivors, but as trust was built and I was perceived to be advocating in their interest, survivors approached me to recount their stories so that I could report about them in our newspaper. Furthermore, I knew many through my academic research on armed conflict and the media, adult literacy and gender in development. My relationship could be described as professional, although this developed into a social one.

3b. What did they tell you about their situation?

Horrific stories of maltreatment such as killing, maiming, sexual abuse, forced labour, starvation, drug and substance abuse. They described their experience of abduction, forced family separations as they had to obey the orders of their captors or faced execution or decapitation and mutilations.

Those who had attempted to escape or refuse to obey orders were severely punished (jailed in 'dug pits', starved, severely beaten and even killed).

Most wanted a speedy and peaceful end to the war so that they could return to their communities, villages and towns. All survivors were keen to return to their vocations and indeed, some would return once they knew that there was a cessation of fighting in their locality.

4. Did you develop a long-term relationship with the survivors? If so, explain.

The children became part of our organization because of their special circumstances-orphaned, displaced, homeless and very deprived, as there were limited structures to accommodate them. The children were constant visitors to our office premises. We developed a special relationship with them. We found schools for them, some went into apprenticeship (learning skills training) and income generation mechanisms which helped to gradually reintegrate them in society and we were able to convince some families to take them into their family homes (not technically adoption but custody).

I (Amadu) established a long-term relationship with many survivors in Sierra Leone. Many survivors kept coming to me and brought or referred others to me to tell their stories. In some cases, I contacted them to introduce me to others or to tell stories others had recounted to them.

5. Did you hear survivors speak about things that they were willing and ready to do, but prevented from doing?

Majority of the children still wanted to go to school, return to their communities and learn other skills that could make them useful in society but were prevented by fear (reprisal from the communities that considered them as perpetrators; resource limitation and insufficient requisite structures to support their desires).

Another major factor that caused some unease was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the UN Special Court for Sierra Leone.

In addition, to Momo's observations, survivors in Sierra Leone expressed the view that they would like to be trained to use weapons, armed and to organize into vigilante groups to defend themselves, families, property and communities. They were also keen to get support to rebuild their homes, villages, towns and communities.

5a. What were the things the survivors most often mentioned wanting to do?

Go to school, reunite with their communities, learn trade that will make them useful and rebuild their communities, for those that got involved in horrible activities wanted to ask for forgiveness so they can live a normal life that was free from fear and prosecution

5b. Rebuild their homes and city

The children were very much keen on ensuring their communities are revived again. They wanted to be part of the rebuilding process so that their communities could stand out again and become recognized.

5c. Help others as a volunteer

The children were impressed by the work of DCI and wanted to be part of it so they can help their peers in the reintegration and rehabilitation process of the country.

The children considered themselves part of the community and the society and as such they think they must be considered in the process of development especially the community driven ones-farming, rebuilding of community structures-'Barry', schools, markets, storage houses.

5d. Find employment

Education and learning other skills through apprenticeship that could prepare them for employment in future was their main interest.

5e. Other

Stigmatisation was their main concern as well as healing of the traumas from the horrific experience of war and violence was the main challenge.

Fear from prosecution was making them jittery when the TRC and Special Court for Sierra Leone were established.

6. Did you notice any actions taken by the survivors to become active agents in their own recovery? Please explain in detail.

Yes, the formation of child friendly organisations (pikin-to-pikin Business, Children's Forum Network, etc) sprung up to create the forum for war-affected children to form social relationships and networks in response to the challenges children were facing.

6a. Listening to each other

Local radio programmes and other outreach initiatives specific for children by children became popular. This created the voice for and by children to talk to their peers in workshops and other entertainment programmes.

6b. Cooking for one another

Those living in Displaced camps and other communal places fend for food, cook and ate together.

6c. Networking with one another

We encouraged children to form social relationships with their peers in communities they found themselves as it was easier to deal with them in such groups than as individuals.

6d. Working with one another to fill shared needs

This only happened in some situations. For example, we would ask that they consider their friends who were more vulnerable and less-abled (kids with disabilities, pregnant girls and the sick) to go in search of assistance and relief supplies from agencies.

Other.

Before the war it was uncommon to see children in the streets or let alone engage in violent crimes. As a consequence of the war, they learned to organize themselves into groups to commit crimes (street pick-pocketing, shop lifting).

7. Did you seek advice from the mental health community on how to respond to the survivors? If so, whom did you seek?

The unavailability of trained and qualified professionals to turn to was a huge challenge. A few aid agencies provided counseling and trauma healing initiatives to children in certain parts of the country on an adhoc basis.

8. What sorts of advice did you receive from the mental health community?

None.

9. What were the steps that you implemented in response to the advice of the mental health community?

None was available

10. What signs of distress did you note among the survivors with whom you worked?

Erratic behavior such as change of mood and extreme anger; being confrontational

10.a Did any of these signs appear to be related to (i.e., caused by, exacerbated by, or ameliorated by) your methods of working with the survivors? Explain

No, this was something they acquired during the war and after being exposed to extreme violence at the war front, particularly subjected to rape, sexual assault, wounding, and murder/killing.

10.b What steps, if any, did you take to address distress related to your methods or work with the survivors?

Non-professional, but traditional methods of calming children including isolation, pampering, group exercise, singing, dancing, drama and role play/drama.

10.c How useful were the steps you took in addressing the situation?

We found the initiatives to do the work at the time. The activities were very useful in calming/controlling them, building relationship and establishing trust.

10.d What were the results?

We observed less violent behavior after some time and we used the kids to help support the new intakes. In addition, there was a reduction in confrontations, fighting and juvenile delinquency as well as an improvement in overall behavior.

11. How did the mental health community ultimately affect your response strategy? Was your strategy successful?

None, as there was no intervention from them.

12. What parts of your strategy presented the most difficulties, and how were these difficulties addressed?

Putting the kids into groups to undertake activities was unsustainable due to lack of funding. We applied to a few aid agencies for support, and asked schools to accept the children in schools and even offered teaching services to them in displaced camps.

13. Other than the mental/behavioral health component of your project, were there other “professional,” “official” elements that had an effect on your project? For example, did you have to administer release forms or adhere to certain governmental codes that influenced the survivors with whom you were working?

We worked closely with the Sierra Leone Police, Prisons Department and Judiciary. At police stations, we asked for their release, as they were minors; in prisons we asked for them to be kept away from adult offenders, in courts we asked for special provisions (magistrates, camera trials). Sometimes we provided bail for them because most of them had any relatives.

14. What did you note, specifically, about the survivors’ use of storytelling (narrative, interviews) during the disaster and immediately after? If narrative seemed to have positive or negative effects in any of these situations, please explain.

Initially, it was difficult to get them talk for fear of rejection and safety. Gradually, we realized they were very good at narrating their ordeals, a development that led to us participating in a partnership research with the University of Ottawa. The survivors were very good at recounting their stories including their capture, recruitment/conscription, involvement in launching armed attacks/fighting, and their final escape, among others.

15. Did you take steps to make narrative (interviews, dialogue) part of your response process? Would you explain?

We were constantly engaged with the children in dialogue, interviews and brain storming sessions, which became part of our strategy to de-traumatise them, establish cordial relationship and build trust.

16. Describe your actions or methods in detail.

Non-conventional methods that were basically based on traditional practices. These include African practices of child rearing, getting kids to engage and dialogue/chat with their family, and community social/cultural activities such as storytelling, singing, drama, role play, etc.

17. What were the results of those methods?

They proved successful and served the purpose (rehabilitation and reintegration). They are opportunities for socializing and interacting that distracted the kids from their horrendous experiences. Being in such communal and social interactions provided a feeling of safety, high self-esteem and security that helped to detraumatise and calm down the kids.

18. Briefly summarize the most successful aspects of your project.

Trauma healing, rehabilitation and reintegration into the community.

19. Final statement. Assuming enough support from various sources (governmental and nongovernmental) to create the best possible outcome for disaster responders, what

would you do, what resources would you employ, and how would you involve the survivor?

A clear strategy will be drawn to respond to the challenge:

- identify and categorise victims in relation to needs and vulnerability
- mobilise available resources (human , material and financial)
- coordinate the efforts of relief agencies through networking and collaboration

Resources will include human (trained specialists), material (buildings as multi-purpose centres) financial for the implementation of sustainable coping mechanisms/strategies .

Involvement of the survivors:

- Need to get them on board any planning or strategic approach adopted or to be taken. Their input must be given prime attention and central to any intervention.
- Engage the survivors through their own recognized structures: opinion leaders, influential members of the society who command respect.
- Empower them through experience sharing in team and collective issues.

It will be very appropriate to have all stakeholders to have a say in all approaches that are employed.