

In the Shadows of Wealth: Poverty as a Catalyst for Violence in the Sierra Leone's Conflict

By Fatmata Tidankay Kamara

Poverty, with no doubt, was a significant contributing factor to Sierra Leone's civil war, as widespread economic hardship and inequality created a breeding ground for discontent and provided an opportunity for rebel groups to exploit the situation by promising change.

“The Commission finds that the central cause of the war was endemic greed, corruption and nepotism that deprived the nation of its dignity and reduced most people to a state of poverty. This context provided ripe breeding grounds for opportunists who unleashed a wave of violence and mayhem that was to sweep through the country” (TRC Chapter 2, Vol.2, Page No.27)

Sierra Leone, once a vigorous land of hope and promise, faced one of the world's most violent conflicts. Its people were left to starve. Receiving little or nothing from those who were supposed to serve them. This made it easier for rebels to gain territories in most of the land using the vulnerability of the youths and manipulating them to join forces with them. So when the conflict broke, many people took it as an opportunity for survivability.

As recorded by the TRC, poverty in Sierra Leone was on the spotlight even before the conflict. However, it is important to note that 'poverty' was not the main cause of the war, but it played a crucial role in spicing up the conflict. As greed and corrupt activities of those who were to serve the nation turned out to be the country's degraders, leaving the citizens with no option but to fight a fight that lingers in the heart of the country till date.

Santigie Sesay, a 33 years old man, recalled how his elder brother chose to join forces with the rebels, saying: “It's better to be a rebel and survive than being a civilian who's always hunted by rebels and hungry with no certainty when you will die.”

Santigie used to live with his family in the southern province. His parents gave birth to ten children, Santigie being the 7th child. Only someone from such a family can truly understand what they were going through even before the outbreak of the conflict.

As the war broke and hit the southern province, Santigie's elder brother took it upon himself as the eldest to join the rebels in order to be able to provide for his family, a journey he never returned from.

"Things were hard. We found it difficult to eat. We sometimes we didn't eat for three days. It was in one of this period that my late brother, Abubakarr, decided to join the rebels just so he could help with our upkeep secretly," he said.

As horrifying as that was, the late Abubakarr took the risk for his family's sake in exchange for his own life. He did as he promised, but not for too long. "He somehow managed to bring us leftover food from the kamajos. Sometimes uncooked food, and sometimes freshly cooked food. He did this for three weeks without his allies' concept. For they had no idea that he was smuggling their food. Our parents were terrified. They tried to stop him but he didn't listen. He normally brought us food three to four times a week. In this particular week, he didn't show up. As anxious as we were, we made ourselves believe that they might have gone somewhere far from us," Santigie narrates.

Abubakarr took the wrong decision. Yes, true. But what other choice did he have? To watch his family starve to death? To be hunted by the deadly rebels every second? He did what he thought was right. What he didn't expect was that the choice he made would be the reason for his death.

The situation took a turn for the worse when Abubakarr did not return to his family for two weeks. At this point, his family had no choice but to accept his fate. You can imagine the pain, anxiety, trauma, and depression his family was going through, especially when they learned about his passing from his friend, who was also part of the rebels.

"When we didn't see him after a week, we still had hope that he would come. But a week turned to two, and it was at this point we crossed path with his friend who told us he was killed in crossfire between their group and another rebel group. It was hard and difficult to accept, especially by our mother. We almost lost her. But we thank God we somehow managed to go through the situation, and we are here today," Santigie said.

When asked if he is not ashamed or feels uncomfortable sharing his brother's story as some might think his brother was among those who caused atrocities, Santigie said: "The sacrifice he made was huge, and that's why we will forever cherish his memories and continue to share his story

whenever we can. My brother was not a rebel. People can think what they want to think, but for us, he was a hero. And all this would not have happened if poverty was not at the center of our lives.”

When asked if they ever testified before the TRC commission, he said: “No. My mom was traumatized at the time. All our focus was on her recovery. We could not bear the loss of another family member, not especially our mother.”

In as much as Abubakarr’s story is heartrending, Memunatu Turay, (Name changed) who was living in a village in Koinadugu District, also lost a son for a similar reason.

Memunatu and her family were always running, looking for a suitable place to hide. Not a day passed without them changing location. The situation was hectic and draining as they lost many of their properties. Her only son, who was 19 years old, while running one day, came across a friend who had joined the rebels for months. They talked for a while, and this friend told him there was a chance to keep his family safe and put a stop to the everyday running. Anyone in his shoe would have loved to hear such a solution to an unending situation.

“His friend told him to join the rebels, and in return, the rebels will keep us safe far from danger and hunger. When he told me about it, I tried to talk some sense into him, but he had already made his decision,” the mother recalled.

Memunatu said that it was against her wish that her son had to joined forces with the rebels, and that because of the responsibilities on his shoulders as the first born and only son, he lost his life while trying to protect and provide for them.

“He was with them for almost three months. And in this three months, we were safe, not running as before, and we had food to eat. But through all this, I knew it was not right. I knew it would not end well. So I had to take my daughters with me and escaped from them. I left him behind because I knew he would not have let us leave if I had told him. He was no longer the son I knew,” she said.

As they say, the mother’s instincts are always right. So it was in this case. Memunatu left with her other children seeking a better alternative in life. While they were in dilemma as to where to go, she heard the news of her son’s passing.

“When I heard he was dead, I could not believe it. I blamed myself for not standing strong as a mother and stopping him. If I had stood my ground, he probably would have been here with me,” she said.

Memunatu did not only lose a son in the conflict, but also her husband, who was killed a year before her son.

“Poverty was our name even before the war. The situation became harder after losing my husband in the hands of the RUF. I was frustrated, and things became extremely hard. But whenever I looked at him, I saw his father. That gave me hope, and they became my source of strength. So his death almost killed me,” she explained.

When asked if there is anything she is benefiting from the government as recommended by the TRC, she said: “No. After the war, I had to stand up for my children, raised and educated them so they can help me when they are grown. And today, I’m glad I did just that.”

Abubakarr Memunatu’s son are not the only ones who suffered this fate. There were thousands of them, people killed because they were poor. Many were killed while in search of food.

The Government and Ministry of Economic Development should lay emphasis on eradicating or minimizing poverty in the country in order to avoid recurrence of the conflict.

This article is brought to you with support from the Africa Transitional Justice Legacy Fund (ATJLF) through the Media Reform Coordinating Group (MRCG), under the project “Engaging Media and Communities to Change the Narrative on Transitional Justice Issues in Sierra Leone.”