

Dark Chapters: How Illiteracy Fueled a National Tragedy

By Fatmata Tidankay Kamara

Illiteracy in Sierra Leone significantly contributed to the civil war by fueling grievances, undermining state-society relations, and creating a fertile ground for recruitment into armed groups. Limited access to education fostered a cycle of poverty and social disintegration, making it easier for marginalized youths to be drawn into the conflict.

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), previously known as “Donors to African Education,” is a “network and partnership” established by a World Bank initiative in 1988. ADEA has played a significant role in the education space for the past 30 years as a convener, knowledge creator, and forum for policy dialogue. In its report in 2006 titled: “Literacy in Post-Conflict Situations –Lessons from Sierra Leone,” it states that illiteracy is a denial of basic human rights and that it contributed greatly to the country’s bottom ranking on Human Development Index (HDI). It also states that it was a significant reason for the rebel war and its brutal conduct.

“Illiteracy represents a denial of a basic human right and largely contributes to Sierra Leone’s ranking at the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI). Illiteracy is both a cause and a consequence of underdevelopment. It was one of the causes of the rebel war and a factor for its brutal conduct,” its reads.

“Lack of education and awareness was why we were killing each other. If the level of education we have now was the same as before, believe you me, we would not have faced those brutalities against each other,” Aminata Kabia, a survivor, narrated

Aminata was a young and vibrant woman who had the courage to watch as the “Gbaytins” burned her hometown. According to Aminata, the Gbaytins were as deadly as the Kamajor. They committed atrocities like any other warring faction. They raped, killed, chopped off hands and feet, and destroyed lives and properties mercilessly.

Fortunately for Aminata, she did not lose any family member to the rebels. But she faced traumatization and nearly died out of starvation and endless running.

“The Gbaytins were the ones that cost us our village. They burned down everything, killed, raped, chopped off hands, and feet. I witnessed everything in my hiding spot, but fortunately, I did not lose any family member or close relatives to the war,” she said, nodding and folding her hands.

Aminata, who is now happily married and a successful businesswoman, added that the lack of education then contributed greatly to war. As many rebels were illiterate and the forcefully recruited ones were also illiterate. The educated ones who were supposed to educate the uneducated were busy creating an environment ripe for rebellion and somehow contributing to the war.

Isata Bah, who has a young adult, walked from Jaiama Sewafe Kono to Lunsar in Tonkolili in search of safety, shared the suffering she and her family endured. Walking such a distance resulted in swollen feet for her family.

Bah believe that if the rate of education was high compared to now, there would have been no war, stating that even if the leaders of the rebel groups were inciting hatred, because their subordinates were educated, they should have offered a better solution to the problem rather than going into war that cost the country its peace, stability, and development.

Just like Aminata, Isata's family was not harmed by the rebels. But the starvation and long-distance walking made her father's health deteriorate, resulting to his eventual demise. Two months later, her mother also died. She was left with her big sister, who supported and educated her to become a successful woman that she is today. "We lost our father due to excessive walking that led to health complications, and our mother died two months after. I should not have been the woman I'm today if my elder sister didn't take me in and give me the best life possible," she said, smiling.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established to address the aftermath of the war. The TRC aimed to create an impartial historical record of the conflict, promote healing and reconciliation, and prevent future human rights abuses. It also sought to address impunity, respond to the needs of victims, and foster a sense of national unity.

Both Aminata and Isata had no idea about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. So they had little or nothing to say about it.

The National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA) was established to implement and cooperate with relevant ministries, departments and agencies in ensuring sustainable socio-economic development programs geared towards the alleviation of poverty, improvement in the well-being of extremely poor Sierra Leoneans, creation of employment opportunities, and improvement in the speed, quality, and impact of development initiatives. The Commission is responsible for the promotion and implementation of community based-sustainable social protection and development programs and to provide for vulnerable Sierra Leoneans, including war survivors. Several attempts to contact NaCSA for insight into this issue proved futile.

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