

Sierra Leone: Youth Unemployment Threatens Peace at Rokupa Wharf Community

By Mohamed Sinneh Kamara

In Rokupa Wharf Community, there is a deep-seated feeling of disgruntlement among young people.

This feeling of dissatisfaction is largely due to joblessness among the youths, which community leaders say has led to increased crime and other vices.

Ibrahim Fofanah, a resident and Harbor Master of Rokupa Wharf, who is better known in the community as S. I. Power Mix, blame the situation on selfishness among community leaders, like headmen. He said whenever an opportunity comes to the community, the local authorities responsible for identifying potential beneficiaries settle for their family members even if they lack the necessary skills required for such opportunities. According to Fofanah, this has left many skilled people without job while the unskilled ones do a bad job of the assignments.

“If these leaders are righteous in doing the actual job by selecting the right people, then there'll be better jobs for youths in the society, and it will encourage investors to invest more. But if the skillful youths that the companies need are absent, it will discourage investors to invest,” he said.

Rokupa Wharf is part of Portee, a slum community whose main economic activity is fishing and sand mining. As Harbor Master, Fofanah controls the movement of boats in and out of the harbor and ensure laws within the community are adhered to by residents and visitors alike. In this capacity, he interacts with a lot of young people.

"In this community, there are youths with skills like driving, tailoring etc, but they are not considered (for job opportunities). Projects are coming, like Mangrove Restoration, Gender Based Training for the Youths, Training for Fishermen, etc., and Non-Governmental Organizations like GOAL Sierra Leone, BRAC are coming to give aid to the youths, but these leaders are only considering their families, whilst those who are capable of doing the skillful jobs aren't considered," Fofanah stressed.

He added: "Even though we have our qualifications in different jobs like driving, electricity, refrigeration, etc., yet we have no job. We only have our daily bread from the temporary jobs around the community."

While the problem of unemployment affects everyone in the community, the situation is worse for women, said Fofanah. He noted that there were many female dropouts in the community because there's no opportunity for them, like hairdressing, tailoring and catering.

Fofanah warned that if something isn't done to put an end to the current status quo, it could lead to chaos.

Unemployment among young people has been referenced among the factors that fueled Sierra Leone's 11-years civil war. Young people, feeling marginalized and disgruntled, saw opportunity to at least make a living in a chaotic environment.

The TRC report Volume 3 chapter 5 paragraph 21 states: "The stagnating economy increased the numbers of even well-educated youths who could not find employment. Western-type education no longer guaranteed employment. Graduates found themselves exposed to the same harsh economic realities that had long been experienced by the uneducated marginalised urban youth."

In Rokupa, according to residents, some youths are now becoming thieves as a result of unemployment. This has resulted to loss of lives for many, said Fofanah. Those who are caught are killed and thrown into the water, he explained.

Fofanah called on the government to monitor institutions responsible for recruiting young people for training and job opportunities to ensure that it is based on merit, rather than nepotism.

Rebecca-Memesie Sesay, Head of Media and Communication Officer at the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM), denied the existence of any unfair play in the selection process for youth employment and other opportunities, noting that they're committed to lead a meaningful transformative and sustainable youth empowerment.

NAYCOM is the government agency tasked with implementing its policies for youth empowerment, under the coordination and supervision of the Ministry of Youths.

Mrs Sesay said in an interview that when it came to youth empowerment, they've created a lot of job opportunities through their centers in major cities across the country, including Freetown, Kenema, Makeni and Bo. She also said that they've employed women into the non-traditional skills market, like construction, under a project sponsored by United Nation Development Program (UNDP). These opportunities, she said, have been implemented in institutions like the Obasanjo Skills Acquisition Training Center, where young people learn skills like solar installation, construction, automobile and civil engineering. There is also the Armed Forces Technical Education College, which is dedicated to providing skills training for girls and women.

The commission also runs programs targeted at highly skillful youths, like the Productive Social Safety Net for Youth (PSSNY). This World Bank supported programme seeks to provide skills training for 8,000 youth across the country, who will in turn compete for a \$3,000 funding each through pitching of innovative ideas.

Mrs Sesay said the Commission uses all accessible media platforms to communicate with young people about these and many other opportunities offered by the government and its partners.

As at the time of this interview, just 300 youths had been registered for the program, she revealed, stressing that you do not need to know anybody within the system to access an opportunity, as long as you meet the requirements, including being within the youth bracket - 18 to 35.

This story 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.