

The Youth Reintegration Training and Education for Peace (YRTEP) Program

Summary of Findings

BEPS

Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity

CREATIVE ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL

In collaboration with

CARE, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, AND GROUNDWORK



United States Agency for International Development

Contract No. HNE-I-00-00-00038-00

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**A COMPONENT OF THE FINAL EVALUATION OF
THE OFFICE OF TRANSITION INITIATIVES' PROGRAM IN SIERRA LEONE**

August 2002

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THE YRTEP CONCEPT

The concept of the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) Youth Reintegration Training and Education for Peace Program (YRTEP)¹ evolved around the time of the 1999 Lome Peace Accord, when Sierra Leone appeared to be ending years of war. OTI's goals for this new project were to help bring closure to a debilitating civil war that had begun in March 1991 and to support the process of reconciliation and reintegration among Sierra Leoneans.

In order to achieve this ambitious goal, OTI looked at the different factors that fueled the conflict. OTI noted how disenfranchised youth were the most important potential source of destabilization in the post-conflict period. If nothing was done to help these youth, there was a definite risk that they would become more susceptible to negative and violent influences.

Recognition of this potential problem was the inspiration for the conceptualization that ultimately led to YRTEP. Through a facilitative planning process in which many stakeholders participated, the concept emerged as a nationwide, community-based, nonformal education initiative for ex-combatant and war-affected young adults. The broad and ambitious range of activities addressed by YRTEP combines the following elements in one program:

- Reintegration of ex-combatants into their communities, orientation of war-affected youth and ex-combatants on issues necessary for reintegration, and psychosocial counseling.
- Training in functional literacy, life-skills training, vocational counseling, and agricultural skills development.
- Civic education (also called education for peace).

YRTEP is implemented by Management Systems International (MSI) and World Vision.

YRTEP OBJECTIVES

To address the issues discussed above, OTI devised four interlinked objectives:

- Assist the reintegration of ex-combatants and war-torn communities.
- Provide remedial education for youth bypassed by schooling during ten years of war.
- Strengthen civil society's peace-building initiatives.
- Build public support for efforts in demobilization of ex-combatants, reconciliation between war-affected youth and ex-combatants, and reintegration of ex-combatants back into society.

¹ Please see the final evaluation of OTI activities in Sierra Leone for a fuller description of YRTEP and the mission's findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS: THE IMPACT OF YRTEP

YRTEP is an impressive and innovative approach to addressing the critical role of youth in Sierra Leone's conflict. It appeared to have had a positive impact on Sierra Leone's peace process, proved successful in a variety of ways, and achieved most of its original objectives (reintegration, strengthen peace-building initiatives, and public support for demobilization).

YRTEP is a qualified success, however, with trade-offs and concerns that need to be addressed in order for YRTEP to reach its full potential. In part, this is due to the fact that YRTEP was implemented under very difficult circumstances. The recurring conflict and instability disrupted many activities and restricted movement. In addition to the security issues, the design and implementation have created expectations about future sustainability and development that the program cannot satisfy in its current form. These added expectations are critically important in terms of the post-OTI phase of the program in Sierra Leone as well as replication in other countries. OTI, MSI, and World Vision are to be commended for their dedication and perseverance that led to YRTEP's success. Concerns need to be addressed, however, in order for YRTEP to reach its full potential.

The following are the evaluation team's major findings regarding the YRTEP Program:²

Design

Integration of Youth: One of the design elements was that YRTEP training groups were to be a combination of ex-combatants and war-affected youth. This allowed YRTEP's work to support the reconciliation and reintegration process and diminish potential conflicts.

Analysis of the Curriculum: Popular but Directive with Low Literacy Gains: According to MSI, the YRTEP curriculum was based on the REFLECT methodology, although our analysis of the YRTEP text shows that it borrows more from peace education models. REFLECT is supposed to be a participatory, bottom-up approach that emphasizes literacy, but the YRTEP curriculum is directive, with minimal literacy instruction and few opportunities for participatory interaction between instructors and students. The YRTEP curriculum, which addresses self, healing mind, body, and spirit, the environment, health and wellbeing, and democracy, good governance, and conflict management, was very resource intensive, and production and distribution of curricular materials were very difficult under the circumstances.

Despite weaknesses described in the analysis, it should be noted that interviews with participants revealed that they were happy with what they learned and spoke highly of the modules, especially modules 1 and 2 (Who Am I and Healing Mind, Body, and Spirit). Regarding literacy and numeracy, which are part of the objectives of the curriculum, the actual educational advancements are very low. YRTEP is not a literacy program. Success stories about gains in literacy tend to be more about the self-confidence that comes with learning how to spell one's name or make short shopping lists instead of becoming functionally literate.

² Please see the final evaluation for a complete list of findings.

Sustainability: Unmet Community Expectations for Program Follow-up: The major weakness of the YRTEP design is the lack of attention paid to program closure. Repeatedly, participants expressed frustration over how the trainings ended, commenting that they felt only partially prepared to implement what they had learned. On the part of OTI and the implementing partners, there is an attitude that end-of-program issues do not require the same level of attention at the community level as the start-up and implementation phases. Sustainability is largely viewed in terms of hand-over during the post-OTI time period.

This is a crucial issue because YRTEP has established an otherwise solid footing for furthering community development programming. Unmet expectations and any resulting frustration threaten to undermine any gains made. As one Learning Facilitator said, “You cannot sensitize people and then have them live in the streets.”

Implementation

A Notable Impact on the Peace Process: The speed with which YRTEP was implemented and expanded was impressive. In two years, during intermittent civil unrest and insecurity, YRTEP trained over 45,000 youth. The fact that training lasts from six months to a year makes the process particularly noteworthy. This was due principally to the very dedicated staff of both MSI and World Vision – particularly the Sierra Leonean staff – who expended a high level of effort to make this program work.

There is no way to quantifiably measure the impact of YRTEP's rapid implementation and direct involvement of tens of thousands of youths. Several well-placed observers who watched the war-to-peace transition, however, believe that YRTEP met an immediate need and helped Sierra Leoneans secure peace in their country. Repeatedly, it was expressed that YRTEP got youth off the street and engaged them in something that was meaningful and beneficial for the community.

Problems in Organization and Implementation: The speed of implementation meant that there was no time to field-test any of the materials. The emphasis on a quick response also caused several early “cracks” in the program that were never overcome. The first major crack arose as a result of the insufficient training of World Vision staff, as they did not adequately understand the program's modules and philosophy.

The second early crack in the program was due to high turnover of senior World Vision staff in Sierra Leone. The repercussions of this institutional instability meant that the linkages World Vision had to YRTEP by being part of the initial conceptualization were lost as the institutional memory left. This compounded the problem of World Vision staff not being trained and contributed to some confusion about World Vision's responsibility.

Taken together, these factors have created field-based tensions among the three YRTEP partners (MSI, OTI, and World Vision) that manifest themselves in a variety of ways and still exist today. It should be noted that there is an opportunity for better communications between MSI and World Vision field staff as MSI has relocated to the World Vision Freetown office.

Access and Managing from Afar: Because of security requirements for US government staff and contractors, it has been difficult for OTI and MSI expatriate staff to visit program sites for much of the life of YRTEP. This made managing the program difficult, especially when addressing some of the concerns raised above.

Impact on the Communities

Behavioral Change and the Reintegration of Ex-combatants into Communities: The most impressive finding is the degree to which participants and community members report that YRTEP results in improving youth behavior. Communities believe that the YRTEP training experience helps youth become less violent and more polite. The most common response was that YRTEP got youth off the streets and into productive and educational activities. Participants report that they are able to function better within their communities because the YRTEP training gave them an improved understanding of cultural norms and helped them control their tempers. Ex-combatants who were involved in the program provided examples of positive behavioral change. They commented that they no longer committed violent acts such as rape and murder because the training gave them a better understanding of such actions and helped them realize that such behavior was wrong. As simplistic as such commentary sounds, this was a frequent assessment shared by ex-combatant trainees and echoed how little ex-combatants understood traditional community values versus their lifestyle in the bush.

Peace Building and Reconciliation: The impact of YRTEP has proven to be as much emotional and spiritual as social. Participants vividly and consistently demonstrate great enthusiasm for the program when describing their experiences and the changes in their lives. Such evidence demonstrates how YRTEP deals with the emotional world of peace and post-war reconciliation. It asks people to face themselves and their community. Participants go through exercises of self-discovery in which they take turns confessing their actions during the war and asking for forgiveness. These emotional exercises are combined with messages of peace and reconciliation and have proved to be very powerful.

Unanticipated Community Development: The impact of YRTEP has gone beyond the anticipated peace building and reintegration and provides a solid foundation for initiating additional community development programs. The YRTEP program has created a level of community enthusiasm, activism, and social organization that community development agents seldom see. The YRTEP message is positive, and participants see it as an impetus to create positive change. Participants and trainers have carried out such community improvement projects as community gardens, cobbler stands, sewing cooperatives, and road maintenance, as well as communication about better cooperation among community members.

Gender Considerations: Empowering Women When Women Are Involved: YRTEP provided a form of education in an education-deprived country. This fact was not lost on female participants, who reported a greater sense of confidence, thought of themselves more as community leaders and as having options, and, in essence, felt less victimized. Women who were illiterate were very happy to be gaining some literacy skills, even if it was only learning how to spell their name. This provided a huge level of self-confidence and enthusiasm. It should be noted that women are well represented at most YRTEP sites.

Coordination

Missed Opportunities with Other Complementary Projects: YRTEP has created an impressive degree of community activism. The evaluators' opinion is that other developmental activities could benefit greatly from the enthusiasm and structure created. Unfortunately, there was very little evidence that other projects were taking advantage of the community activism created under YRTEP. The exception is World Vision, which has natural links with other projects, and Talking Drums Studio, which used YRTEP stories as part of its programming. Another possible exception is Christian Children's Fund (CCF), which is in the initial stages of implementing the STEG project (an income-generating activity) and hopefully plans to coordinate with YRTEP members. There is no link, however, with the Nation-Building project, even though they work in similar communities and have complementary objectives. Non-OTI activities, such as activities under the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (NCDDR), have virtually no collaboration despite similar objectives.

REPLICABILITY

YRTEP can and should be replicated. The theme of inclusion – targeting thousands of ex-combatant as well as marginalized, out-of-school youth – makes YRTEP a potentially critical contributor to other peace-building efforts. YRTEP in Sierra Leone successfully reached tens of thousands of youth, energizing the transition from war to peace by involving out-of-school and ex-combatant youth in productive activities. It also reached them in remarkably short order.

The trade-offs caused by a swift start-up were noteworthy, however, and lessons arising from this evaluation should be drawn from when YRTEP is hopefully adapted elsewhere. The roles and relationships of OTI and its partners will have to be adjusted according to the expertise and capacity of each agency. YRTEP's curriculum should be customized to meet local contexts and requirements. It may be useful to reconsider the program's reliance on materials that proved difficult to reproduce and transport. The mostly directive nature of teaching methods should also be reconsidered, to the degree it is possible. Finally, a revised curriculum should be field-tested and evaluated, with findings used to make improvements, before the program becomes a potentially nationwide, or even regionwide, endeavor.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YRTEP³

- Expand the YRTEP Program.
- Improve closure and address sustainability.
- Provide training and orientation for World Vision staff and Community Management Committee (CMC) members.
- Monitor relationships among field staff.
- Explore ways to better address sexual violence issues.
- Improve the monitoring and mentoring of Learning Facilitators.
- Enhance coordination with other programs.
- Improve access to micro-credit schemes.

³ Please see the final evaluation for the full description of the recommendations for YRTEP.