The Socio-economic Consequences of Ebola in Sierra Leone: Challenges and Prospects for Youth

HE Edward Mohamed Turay
High Commissioner of Sierra Leone to the UK

George Hodgson
Head of Ebola Taskforce, UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Layne Robinson
Head of Youth Programmes Section, Commonwealth Secretariat

Dr Sylvia Olayinka Blyden
Youth Rights Activist

Chair: Dr Alex Vines OBE
Research Director, Area Studies and International Law; Head, Africa Programme, Chatham House

20 January 2015

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.
Introduction

This panel discussion was held as the Ebola epidemic in West Africa showed signs of coming under control. The event aimed to explore prospects for the long-term development of Sierra Leone and its young population.

The meeting and the question and answers session were held on the record, and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

For more information, including recordings, transcripts, summaries, and further resources on this and other related topics, please visit www.chathamhouse.org/research/africa.

HE Edward Mohamed Turay

HE Turay said that the Ebola outbreak is one of the greatest challenges that the global health community has witnessed, and undoubtedly the most daunting crisis that has faced Sierra Leone since the end of the civil war. The international community was initially late in realizing that Ebola could not be tackled by the affected countries alone. The speaker emphasized that Ebola is not a West African concern but a global concern. He called for a swift and effective response to match the scale and urgency of the challenge.

Turay described the Sierra Leonean government’s actions as swift and robust. He gave the example of the government’s declaration of a state of emergency, which shut down Sierra Leone for three days and allowed 27,000 health educators to provide life-saving information to every household in the country. The government also placed areas of the country under protective and corrective quarantine, and moved millions of dollars from other sectors towards the health sector to combat the public crisis. The speaker also commended the efforts of international partners, especially the UK.

The High Commissioner went on to outline the areas that require continued significant support in Sierra Leone. He called for more treatment centres, laboratories, equipment, clinicians and health workers, in addition to more training for national doctors, nurses and health workers. Logistical support to improve response times is also required, including experts, information managers and ambulances specially customized to deal with Ebola. In addition to shattering an already fragile health-care system, the Ebola outbreak has severely impacted the economy, food security, transportation, services and social cohesion.

The speaker summarized an IMF report released in 2013 that focused on Sierra Leone’s economic success. The report described a 20 per cent expansion in Sierra Leone’s output, a fall to single-digit inflation, increased food supply and increased real GDP. Before the Ebola outbreak, Sierra Leone was regarded as one of the greatest growing economies in Africa, with one of the most stable exchange rates and manageable public debt. The Ebola outbreak paralysed and devastated the economy. One leading company working in Sierra Leone filed for bankruptcy, while another suspended mining operations and repatriated its foreign staff. Schools, colleges and universities have been closed. The Ebola outbreak has also affected small businesses, cultural projects and a host of other activities in the country. The economic impact on youth has been devastating.

Turay explained that one-third of Sierra Leone’s population is aged between 15 and 35. They have actively participated in the eradication of Ebola through their involvement in sanitation, youth employment schemes and in the creation of a National Youth Forum in Masiaka. Sengbeh Chiefdom, in Koinadugu District, recently donated 1,000 acres of land for the establishment of a National Youth Village, which will
be a centre of excellence providing skills training for young people. The High Commissioner concluded by acknowledging that Sierra Leone’s youth have been at the forefront of the national fight to eradicate Ebola.

**George Hodgson**

George Hodgson then spoke on the international response to the Ebola outbreak. He said that the rate of infection is now falling in Sierra Leone, highlighting that the World Health Organization (WHO) found that the number of new cases per week had fallen from 500 in December 2014 to 100. The speaker cautioned that despite these figures, the situation across the region continued to be worrying and Ebola is not yet defeated. The speaker recognized leadership from the government of Sierra Leone as a critical factor in the response.

Hodgson explained that the UK government position is to continue to provide resources and guidance. The UK has committed more than £230 million, which has been spent on 1,400 hospital beds, six Ebola treatment centres, and the training and deployment of more than 4,000 health-care workers. Three laboratories are being operated by Public Health England (PHE). Some 1,500 National Health Service (NHS) and 185 PHE staff have volunteered to travel to Sierra Leone. Military personnel have been deployed, and the UK is training more than 100 burial teams, helping 95 per cent of reported deaths to be buried safely within 24 hours. Outreach work has been led by government, religious and community leaders and an important youth component. £2.5 million will be delivered through UNICEF in support of orphaned children.

The speaker continued to explain the UK’s support for planning the next phase of the fight against Ebola, which will focus on localized hotspots. He said that this will require different commitments from the international community, including more epidemiologists and specialists in contact-tracing and surveillance to allow for a more deployable response. Transition to the next phase entails difficult questions about the pace at which essential services should be restarted. Schools have been closed since July 2014, and the speaker argued that they should be reopened in a safe and sustainable way. He called for a similar reopening of non-Ebola health-care facilities.

The speaker outlined the UN Development Programme (UNDP)-led Ebola reconstruction assessment across the affected region. He emphasized the importance of the governments of affected countries taking the lead of this assessment. He concluded by describing the UN Peacebuilding Commission’s forthcoming assessment of the impact of Ebola on governance, conflict management and the rule of law, and highlighted an EU–UN conference that President Ernest Bai Koroma and other regional presidents are likely to attend.

**Layne Robinson**

Layne Robinson drew similarities between Sierra Leone and other vulnerable Commonwealth countries that have experienced external factors that quickly pushed them into economic and social turmoil. He explained the challenge for such states to build strategies to bolster their resilience to economic, weather-related or health-related exogenous shocks.

He urged Sierra Leone’s government to return to its blueprint for youth development, which was in place before the Ebola outbreak, once the epidemic has passed. The Commonwealth recently compiled a Youth Development Index (YDI), in which Sierra Leone was ranked first in the area of civic participation. The speaker argued that the resilience of young people could be enhanced through projects such as the
National Youth Employment Scheme, the National Youth Forum and the National Youth Village. He outlined the Commonwealth’s support, including a youth ministers meeting scheduled to take place in Cameroon in February 2015 and long-term support for Sierra Leone’s public health sector.

The speaker concluded by presenting some perspectives from young people in Sierra Leone. They asked for investment in education and in the economy, and for educational support while schools are closed. They also expressed concern regarding children, specifically orphans.

Dr Sylvia Olayinka Blyden

Dr Blyden acknowledged the efforts of President Koroma’s government, the international community, media, civil society, community groups and NGOs. She thanked volunteer nurse Pauline Cafferkey on behalf of the people of Sierra Leone, and applauded British High Commissioner Peter West. Blyden expressed the view that the swift spread of Ebola was the result of the health-care needs of remote parts of Sierra Leone being ignored. She said that health care should be considered as being as important as other human rights issues.

Blyden explained that at the start of the Ebola crisis, Sierra Leone had 3,506 hospital beds. She illustrated the under-provision of beds to some areas – giving the example of Kailahun District, which had only 80 beds to serve a population of tens of thousands. Blyden identified health care, good education, social empowerment, financial prospects, employment prospects and an inclusive political voice for young people and women as issues that are central to Sierra Leone’s future. She argued that it was the collective failure to meet these challenges since independence that allowed Ebola to overcome Sierra Leone. The speaker highlighted the effect of Ebola on young people and women, as 60 per cent of those infected are under the age of 35 and women are the primary caregivers in the country.

The speaker emphasized the importance of a political voice for women and youth, arguing that the problems facing them predate Ebola. She pointed to the leadership demonstrated by young people and women in the current crisis, and said that this role should be replicated in Sierra Leone’s governance. Blyden highlighted that Sierra Leone only has one female cabinet minister, and said that efforts should be made to ensure that more women reach high offices of governance and that they are protected once there. Blyden said that token appointments are no longer tenable, and called on the president to fulfil his campaign promise to empower more women.

The speaker described President Koroma’s empowerment of young people as inspirational, and said that the president’s influence was the reason for increased civic participation, as recognized in the YDI. She gave the example of the chairman of the board of Sierra Leone’s National Revenue Authority, a young lawyer who was elevated to this appointment by the president. Blyden said that such appointments inspire more young people to be involved in governance.

The speaker noted that the Ebola outbreak occurred 10 years after the publication of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report that painted a dismal picture of youth prospects in Sierra Leone. She said that youth development had significantly improved by the time of the outbreak. The current government has successfully established District Youth Councils to involve young people in national and district-level development planning processes. For example, in Koinadugu District the youth spontaneously formed voluntary task forces, manning checkpoints to restrict the movement of people with Ebola symptoms. Young people also took the initiative to provide precautionary education in slum neighbourhoods. Blyden contrasted the findings of the TRC, which found that young people regarded...
violence as their only opportunity to implement changes, to the situation today, in which young people see themselves as champions in the fight against Ebola.

Blyden asserted that empowering young people is the solution to the detrimental socio-economic effects of Ebola in Sierra Leone. She said that orphans require special social measures; and that while free basic education is already in place it must be enforced. With education, people would not have attributed the outbreak of Ebola to superstition. Blyden reiterated that a lack of health care in any of Sierra Leone’s remote areas is a threat to global health, and called for Sierra Leone and its development partners to further recalibrate the current agenda for prosperity, which is based on a poverty reduction platform.

Summary of Questions and Answers

The panel was asked to comment on wider regional discussions between countries.

George Hodgson explained that the UK is the principle international actor in Sierra Leone, while the US is in Liberia and France works in Guinea. He maintained that it was important to continue good contact between the three affected countries, and also between the UK, the US and France. The speaker said that is also important to involve countries such as Mali.

Dr Blyden also addressed the importance of discussions between Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. Because the Kissi, who live in a region overlapping the three countries, are so remote from the capitals of these countries, they are often neglected. She outlined a proposed plan backed by the Chinese government to form an economic hub in the region, similar to a duty-free area, where manufacturing companies can operate. This would transform the region economically and create a more modern situation there.

Layne Robinson addressed the importance of partnerships between young people across the continent. He added that partnerships should also involve stakeholders from the private sector, both African and non-African.

Questions were asked regarding job prospects and standards of living, the potential for first-stage production, and strategies for rebuilding Sierra Leone’s international image.

Blyden described the lack of attention within Sierra Leone to public relations and branding efforts as being one of the lapses in government. The speaker also explained that Sierra Leone was a destroyed society after the civil war, and establishing a clean, stable energy supply is still a primary concern of the government. For a drive towards first-stage manufacturing to be possible, basic energy needs in Sierra Leone must be met. She also described tax relief for companies as necessary in providing jobs. She argued that in a competitive world, Sierra Leone needs to incentivize investors.

George Hodgson called on investors to help rebuild Sierra Leone’s image by identifying what the country should do to demonstrate that it had moved on from Ebola.

In response, a comment was made that if Sierra Leone’s government liberalized its internet gateway, then companies could create thousands of jobs by outsourcing secretarial and accounting services to Sierra Leone.

Concerns were raised concerning the stigmatization of orphans and the release date of an Ebola vaccine.
George Hodgson explained that clinical trials of Ebola vaccines were taking place in the three affected countries. He said that normally the vaccine process would take 10 years to complete, but in order to combat the Ebola outbreak trials are being fast-tracked.

Blyden highlighted the stigmatization of orphans as an important issue in need of addressing. She pointed to the closure of schools leading to a significant increase in teenage pregnancies.

Further Information

Sierra Leone’s blueprint for youth development is available online: www.nationalyouthcommission.sl/pdf%20files/blue%20print.pdf