I fought for nine years with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) as one of their middle level commanders before the war came to an end in Sierra Leone. I then moved over to Liberia in search of a job so I could forget about war and live a decent life. I was not able to get a job and ended up suffering until the second war started in 1999. Through a friend I got recruited to fight on the side of the Liberian government forces. I had to escape and come back to Sierra Leone as soon as former president Charles Taylor left Liberia as I had made many enemies there.

Julius Kamara, a young former fighter from Bo

Liberian and Sierra Leonean youths have faced alienation and economic hardship. This has led some into violence. Peacebuilding initiatives have sought to educate, employ and empower youths. But political reforms so far have not met the scale of the challenge and excluded young people are still involved in political violence, criminal gangs and mercenary activity: the cycle has not been broken.

This article discusses young people’s experiences and perspectives before, during and after the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It is based on semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors with 30 young people between the ages of 18 and 35 from both countries: 17 men and 13 women; ex-combatants and non-combatants; from rural and urban communities. Interviews were conducted in June and July 2011. Interviewees were selected based on their age and personal experiences of youth issues and the challenges faced by young people in their countries. The article also draws on past interviews and research conducted by the authors and others from 2004 to 2011.

Exclusion and conscription
Ishmail Tarpeh, a former combatant in Liberia, outlines some of the circumstances that preceded his involvement in the war:

We had no access to farms, education was expensive and our parents could not afford to send us to school, so we got stuck in illiteracy and had no place in society. The government of Samuel Doe did not care as they were using the money of the country to send their own children to schools and universities overseas. We spent the evenings as frustrated people discussing this in our little corners, waiting for the right moment to seek revenge.

Before the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia there was a high rate of illiteracy among young people that impeded their access to the job market. Young people also had little or no access to land.

Many youths perceived the justice system as hostile. Hassan Konneh describes his experiences of the local court in Pujehun, southern Sierra Leone:

Young people were given fines that did not correspond to crimes committed and in most cases the court system was used to intimidate them.

Girls and young women have experienced acute challenges through war and peacetime, including domestic and sexual violence and poor access to education and employment. Reporting wartime abuses was often frowned upon and risked bringing shame to households or communities. Women and girls have also faced exclusion from peace processes.

During the war, forced conscription to armed groups through abduction was common and children were easy targets. But many young people also volunteered to fight as a means to political, social or economic advancement, or to right perceived wrongs.

An idle mind is the devil’s workshop; we were dreaming and sometimes imagining we had guns to kill those
who were making us suffer. The war gave us the guns, which made us our own masters.

Santigie Kallay

Youth conscripts sought to escape their existing circumstances, to pursue potential opportunities for personal development or to access resources. Jobs and money were high among desired rewards from fighting. Some RUF youth members were enticed with prospects of future educational opportunities such as scholarships abroad.

After the violence: youth fighters’ post-war trajectories

The destruction wrought by conflict has entrenched disadvantages for young people in Liberia and Sierra Leone, depriving a generation of education and livelihood opportunities. Youth and children accounted for significant proportions of fighters in armed groups during the wars, and there are still many factors that render young people prone to recruitment into violence today.

Some Sierra Leonean and Liberian youths, frustrated by their economic circumstances and familiar with violence as a possibility, have gone on to fight in the recent conflict in Côte d’Ivoire. Former RUF fighter Momoh Kamara says:

Regardless of how hard I tried I just could not get a job. I am educated and tried even applying for jobs that I am over qualified for with no success. So I went through Liberia into Ivory Coast to become part of any group looking for a potential fighter. I was told by my friend that Sierra Leonians and Liberians are immediately accepted. I met many of my colleagues from the RUF there and within days we were back in action and big guys once again.

Some former youth combatants have joined political parties’ electoral ‘task forces’ in Liberia and Sierra Leone – vigilante groups set up to handle ‘security’, or more accurately to intimidate voters and break up opposition rallies – on the promise of benefits once their side wins elections. [See Electing for peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone by Frances Fortune and Oscar Bloh in this publication]

In reality, after an election young fighters have little chance of seeing a politician again until their ‘security’ services are needed once more. Foday Kallon, a youth engaged with one of the Sierra Leonean ‘task forces’ during the 2007 elections, expresses his anger at this:

They [politicians] used me and my friends in 2007 after which we never heard from them again. They should know that they will not have the opportunity again. If they want young people to stand up for them and intimidate the other parties let them send out their own children.

Rehabilitation

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes led by UN peacekeeping missions in both Liberia and Sierra Leone were intended to provide opportunities for young combatants to start afresh. Approximately 71,000 combatants, including around 7,000 children (under 18 years old) were disarmed and demobilised in Sierra Leone. Of around 103,000 combatants disarmed and demobilised in Liberia, 11,000 (more than ten per cent) were children.

But funding, design and delivery problems have undermined the sustainability of these processes and their benefit to young people. Budgetary and time pressures caused DDR initiatives to focus only on those with weapons. Young combatants whose weapons were confiscated by their commanders were consequently excluded from DDR programmes, as were cooks, sex slaves, bush wives, spies and load carriers. This left many young people socially and economically marginalised, and sometimes alienated from their communities due to the crimes they had committed.

For youths who did participate in DDR, reintegration initiatives were weak. Programmes to help ex-combatants forge sustainable livelihoods were poorly resourced and were not linked to real employment opportunities. Many youths’ expectations were not managed or met. Foday Fofana, a former member of Sierra Leonean armed group the West Side Boys, describes his experiences of DDR:

Our caseworkers [from the National DDR Commission, tasked with assessing ex-combatants’ needs and capacities and providing advice on reintegration options] told us we would be whatever we wanted to be in life. I wanted to become a computer hardware technician. I was put in a computer school where there were only two computers – hardly working properly – with 50 of us in my class. By the time I got to touch a computer the programme had ended. I was left angry and frustrated as the knowledge promised was never gained. We were given sweet words. Now they have the weapons and we have nothing, not even hope.

Youth policy: national and international

National and international policy reforms and programmes have focussed on youth exclusion and underemployment in both Liberia and Sierra Leone. The Liberian Joint Programme on Youth Employment and Empowerment seeks to boost youth employability and enable young people
to contribute to peacebuilding. In Sierra Leone, a National Youth Commission established in 2010 engages and advises government ministries and stakeholders on the needs of young people.

The UN, the German Development Cooperation, the World Bank and the European Union set up the $46 million Joint Response to Youth Employment for Sierra Leone in 2010. This includes a Youth Employment and Empowerment Programme, which hopes to generate 61,000 jobs in 2011, rising to 174,000 by 2015. Sierra Leone’s Ministry of Labour in 2008 reported that 45.8 per cent of all unemployed Sierra Leoneans (3 million of a population of 6.5 million) were youths [see Further Reading].

Quick impact projects, such as road-building, digging wells and supporting agriculture, have been aimed at kick-starting local economies and normalising economic conditions for young people in the short-term. Numerous non-governmental organisations also try to complement the efforts of governmental and inter-governmental actors.

But economic challenges for West African youths remain. Private sectors in Liberia and Sierra Leone are small and can only create a limited number of jobs. Public sectors cannot afford good salaries. Employability remains a problem. Many Liberian and Sierra Leonean youths, especially girls and young women, are illiterate and there are few educational opportunities in either country. Even educated youth lack specific employment skills or vocational training.

Many young people have migrated to cities or to other countries in search of opportunities. Freetown and Monrovia have become overcrowded and living conditions are poor. Ami Kanneh describes life in Monrovia:

> I have no place to call home. I have to wait every night for the market to be empty so I can find a place to sleep. I eat from leftovers in restaurants and market stalls. Before the war, I had a home and there was food to eat no matter how little. Now I have nothing except my death to wait for.
Youths in Liberia and Sierra Leone feel that there is a lack of will on the part of politicians to help them. They express their anger in different ways. Musicians such as Emerson Bockarie, Pupa-Bajah, the Bow-Wow Society and Dry-Yai Crew are an important voice for young people’s frustrations. Information and communication technologies such as cell phones and social networking are linking young people together.

“Many Liberian and Sierra Leonean youths, especially girls and young women, are illiterate and there are few educational opportunities in either country”

Conclusions
Peacebuilding policy responses to youth exclusion in Liberia and Sierra Leone must reflect the scale and urgency of the challenge, and reach those most vulnerable to recruitment into violence. The challenges are economic, political and social.

To empower young people economically, access to quality education must be increased dramatically to combat illiteracy and build skills in both countries. Vocational training should be linked to labour market analyses and demand. In the short term, young people living in rural areas should be helped to engage in cash-crop production. Land reform processes must be expedited through technical support to the Land Commissions to help youths to access and own land. Longer-term, creating jobs requires donors to support domestic private sector development, particularly in agriculture and tourism.

To foster political inclusion and prevent the violent instrumentalisation of youths, international engagement with political parties should be extended to include their youth wings: to discourage parties from acting as recruiting agencies for ‘task force’ vigilantism during elections, and to support training and dialogue on non-violence, leadership, multi-party elections, human rights and the rule of law.

Sierra Leone’s Youth Commission aims to champion youth development and young people’s participation in politics. It is new and untested but it deserves attention, encouragement and support. Youth commissions could help young people in Sierra Leone and Liberia, especially ex-combatants, to play active peacebuilding roles in their communities. Youth commissions could also be hubs of learning, exchange and potential collaboration on youth inclusion policy between the two countries, whose challenges are so intertwined.

The less tangible dimensions of youth inclusion, such as social integration, are too often neglected. There is an urgent need to recognise and address the incomplete reintegration of young ex-combatants in particular. DDR in Liberia and Sierra Leone has officially ended; but many young ex-combatants remain jobless, alienated and mentally ‘mobilised’. Reintegration is a long-term process encompassing reconciliation and community-wide peacebuilding. Policymakers should assess young ex-combatants’ outstanding needs and support reintegration initiatives that explicitly involve communities in order to avoid perceptions of unfair peace dividends and build community confidence in and inclusion of young ex-combatants.

Ibrahim Bangura has wide-ranging experience in the fields of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants (DDR), gender, child protection monitoring and rehabilitation, and research and monitoring and evaluation. He holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and history, University of Sierra Leone; a master’s degree in gender studies, University of Sierra Leone; and a master’s in international development studies, University of Amsterdam. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in economics at the HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management, Germany.

Irma Specht is an anthropologist with expertise in the field of the reintegration of ex-combatants and child soldiers. She is the co-author of Young soldiers: why they choose to fight (2004), and Red Shoes, experiences of girl combatants in Liberia (2006). She is currently the Director of Transition International, a consultancy firm based in the Netherlands.