

Sylvannus Murray, Sierra Leone. A project descriptive essay which speaks to Principle 16 on encouraging and supporting mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation

## Using the Earth Charter with Ex-combatants in Sierra Leone



**Sylvannus Murray** is a graphic designer, presently working with the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone as an Information Assistant. He

he has taken on youth leadership roles in his church and community as early as 1992. Since then, he has been actively involved in youth work at national and international levels. Mr. Murray founded the Youth Empowerment for Development Ministries in 1998. It is a non-profit, non-governmental, non-partisan umbrella youth organisation seeking to address the welfare of young people in Sierra Leone and beyond. Mr. Murray works with the Earth Charter Youth Initiative and coordinates the Earth Charter Youth Group in Sierra Leone.

government troops, the civil defence militia, or the rebel force of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Hence women became vulnerable to all the warring factions. Most of them were raped, brutally assaulted, or even maimed and amputated.

The Sierra Leonean youth faced a similar situation. In the pre-war period, young people formed an alarming percentage of the uneducated and unemployed portion of the population and had no significant influence upon policy formulation or decision-making. The devastating economic situation made many of them join the armed groups. Others were forcibly conscripted. Thus, young people largely comprised the bulk of the warring factions, whereas only a very small number of them were among the decision-makers. They took instructions from their commanders to loot, burn, maim, rape, and kill. According to testimonies from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), youths serving as soldiers were drugged and ill-trained and forced to commit the cruellest human rights violations against innocent civilians of their communities. Some of them were even forced to commit atrocities against their own parents. Thus, the issue of reconciling ex-combatants with their local communities is imperative in our current post-war situation. Here, the Earth Charter comes into play as its ethical vision of sustainability, non-violence and peace can serve as a guideline in the effort of promoting a culture of peace and toleration.



Therefore, we held several meetings with leaders of various youth organizations at which the Earth Charter was discussed in the light of our major concerns of post-war reconstruction and economic development. The meetings culminated in the establishment of a committee of twenty representatives drawn from different, umbrella youth organizations and community based organizations which is called Earth Charter Youth Group – Sierra Leone (ECYG-SL). The group pinpointed on Principle 16 which elaborates the components of a global society at peace, including tolerance and non-violence. The group was conscious of the fact that tolerance is indispensable for understanding, solidarity, and cooperation in the post-war reconstruction efforts of the Sierra Leonean youth.

In one of our major early activities, we participated in a week-long workshop at the second capital city of Bo and introduced the Earth Charter to the other 350 participants. The result was great –

**S**ierra Leone currently faces the challenge of social reconstruction after enduring a decade-long war that was concluded in 2002. It claimed some 50,000 victims and left thousands of people injured and traumatized. The women and youths were mostly affected. Deeply perceived in their traditional roles as housekeepers and child-bearers, women were relegated to the back in all aspects of socio-political and community discourses. The outbreak of war further worsened their conditions. They were largely left to protect themselves and their children as most men departed the villages and towns to hide in the bushes while others joined the

Principle 16. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence and peace.

giving birth to two further Earth Charter Youth Groups in Bo. Another group of twenty youth leaders was established in the east-end of the capital, Freetown. The creation of this second group in Freetown enabled young people from that part of the city to work together in not only incorporating the principles of the Earth Charter and practicing them, but to also take the Charter to other members of their groups and communities.

The ECYG-SL used the tenets of Earth Charter Principle 16 to encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation between the ex-combatants and other members of the community. This is mostly done through organizing community meetings and conducting sensitization sessions aimed at fostering dialogues and discussions about the values of sustainable development and peace among the participants. In one of these sessions, we addressed ex-combatants who were trainees of the vocational training centre of Peacelinks. One of our main points was that, as young men who are currently being disarmed, demobilized and are now on the verge of been reintegrated into society, it is of vital importance that the former fighters are informed about issues that are happening around them, both at national and international levels. The main cause for one of the most brutal conflicts in the history of the country was the lack of true information. When people are well-informed, they can be also empowered to participate in projects that can help to develop and



safeguard their communities. It was further emphasized that if we want to find better ecological, economic, political, cultural, and even spiritual ways of protecting human societies, we need to demilitarize our minds and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations. The concluding discussion about the possibilities for future collaboration and the presentation of a series of publications about the Earth Charter formed the highpoints of the sensitization.

Among the groups which endorse the Charter and partner with the ECYG-SL is the Firestone Cultural Community Development Organization (FCCDO.). The FCCDO has not only introduced the Earth Charter to youth and children of the community, but it has also been using the Earth Charter as a comprehensive strategy to prevent violent conflict and to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes. One of such comprehensive strategies that takes heed to the interrelation of ecological, economic, and security concerns is the introduction of home-garbage collection for members of the Firestone Community. Initially, members of the community sent their children, or wards, to dispose of their garbage in a nearby Nicol Stream, which is used by many as a source of drinking water and other domestic purposes. This engendered frequent quarrels among members of the community which sometimes resulted in violent conflicts

and police matters. The ECYG-SL, comprising members from FCCDO, introduced the collection of garbage from the homes of community residents. Using principles of the Earth Charter, the members were able to persuade community members to join the program. This created some form of employment for young people, helped to create conducive sanitary conditions in the community, and also reduced the number of conflicts about the pollution of the river as the garbage is now deposited at the government-approved dump site at Bomeh.

This activity gives proof to the fact that environmental protection, economic development, and peace are inextricably linked. In search of a new vision that promotes economic stability, respect for all forms of life, good governance, human rights, and democracy, the youths in our country have found the Earth Charter as a guiding document. Inadequate shelter, food, health care, and education are widely considered as some of causes that led to the ten-year war and have the potential of dragging the country into another round of social turmoil. Therefore, these issues must be addressed in an integrated approach, as it is outlined in the Earth Charter. ●

