



Exposed to civil war as children, Sierra Leone's young adults suffer in the labour market

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Key messages

- **Training programs are needed to compensate for the education gap created by the conflict in Sierra Leone**
 - Young adults who were preschool or primary school age during the civil war accumulated less education and are now less likely to be employed.
- **Labour market policies should include inclusive employment programs**
 - The negative employment effects on people exposed to the conflict are more significant for women than men.

Sierra Leone's young adults struggle to find decent work

The violent civil conflict in Sierra Leone that lasted from 1991 to 2002 destroyed most of the country's social, economic, and physical infrastructures. By the end of the war, almost half the country's population was displaced (2.1 million people), 50,000 people had died, and more than 40,000 human rights violations had been committed.

The violence began in the east, spreading to the north and south almost four years later. It only reached Freetown, the capital city, in the west in 1998.

A peace agreement signed in January 2002 marked the end of the war and the beginning of the transition to peace. The government of Sierra Leone implemented a range of post-conflict policies. These policies included economic measures to encourage economic growth and employment opportunities, and active labour-market policies—particularly skills development training—to increase youth employability.

Young adults (aged 18-35 in 2019) represent about 34% of Sierra Leone's population, are the country's largest population group, and most were exposed to the conflict as children. The highest rates of unemployment and underemployment are among young adults. Around 50% of the young adult population is illiterate (compared to 39% in Sub-Saharan Africa) and 60% is structurally underproductive. The lack of economic opportunities for young people goes beyond an economic problem to threaten Sierra Leone's fragile social and political stability.

Understanding how exposure to conflict as children affects future employment outcomes can help the government design effective interventions to encourage economic growth and peace.

A team of local PEP researchers sought to assess how exposure to conflict at key stages of early life affects future labour market outcomes.



Photo: Dominic Chavez/World Bank

The analysis

The team constructed an index of conflict exposure at the chiefdom level. The index is based on an aggregation of crimes against individuals, crimes against assets, and public order crimes. Exposure was assessed for men and women born between 1978 and 1993 in Sierra Leone at different stages of life:

- pre-birth/in utero (up to two years before birth),
- early childhood (0-3 years),
- preschool age (4-6 years)
- primary school age (7-13 years)

Given that the conflict affected different areas of the country at different times, the research team used a difference-in-difference approach to analyse data from the 2011 Sierra Leone Integrated Household Surveys (SLIHS), the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (2004), and the Sierra Leone Local-Location Event Dataset (SLL-LED) derived from the No Peace Without Justice (2004) report.

Key findings

Conflict-exposure during primary school age has a long-term negative impact on employment and labour-market participation in Sierra Leone.

- Can reduce the probability of being employed or participating in the labour market by up to 3%
- Women are more affected than men
- The effect continues even ten years after the end of the war

Conflict-exposure, particularly for very young children, reduces long-term earning potential.

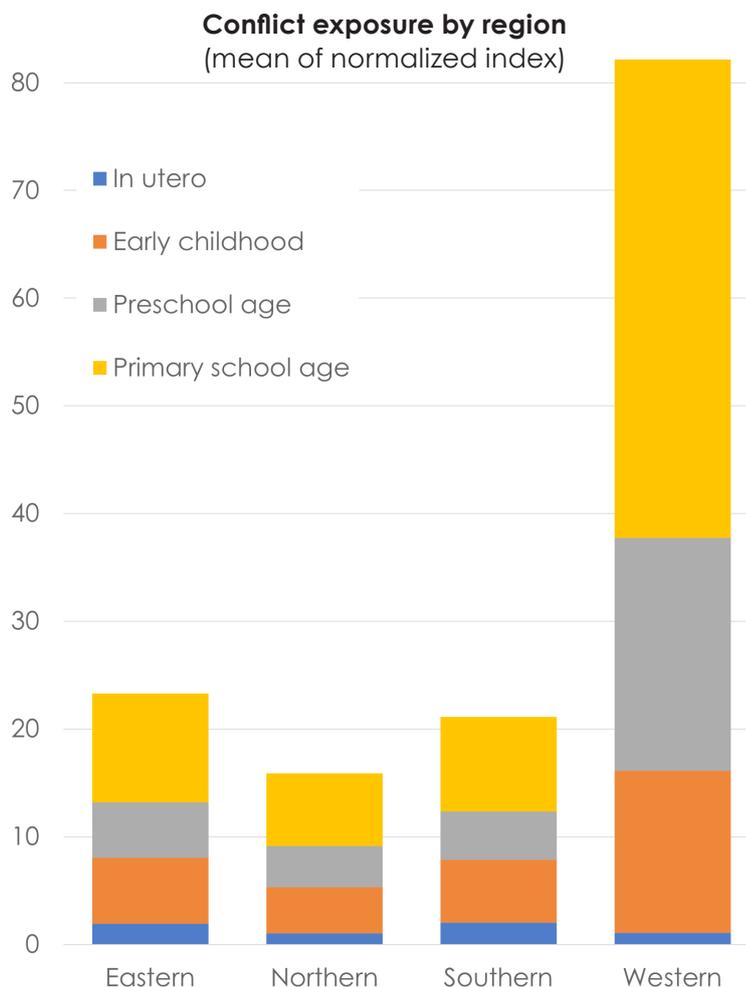
Average hourly wages decrease by:

- 68% for people exposed before birth
- 69% for people exposed in early childhood
- 42% for people exposed at preschool age
- 15% for people exposed at primary school age

The negative effect on long-term employment outcomes is because conflict is linked to a reduction in education.

- People exposed to conflict at preschool and primary school age accumulate less education
- 1 standard deviation in the index of conflict exposure led to a loss of six and four months of education (respectively)

Figure 1 (right) shows the variation of conflict-exposure across regions and between key stages of life. Primary school age individuals are found to be affected the most.



Source: Authors using SLIHS (2011), TRC (2004) and SLL-LED (2014)

Conclusions and policy implications

To address the long-term negative impact of the conflict on the employment prospects and labour market participation of Sierra Leone's youth, and to encourage economic growth, **interventions and policies that support people who were preschool or primary school age during the civil war are needed.**

As people exposed to conflict accumulated less education, **training programs in the areas that were most affected by the conflict may increase youth productivity.**

- A combination of on-the-job training and school-based education as well as improvements to apprenticeships may improve skill levels and increase remuneration.

Since women are less likely to be employed than men several years after the war, **specific active labour market policies are needed to support women's labour market participation.**

- These may include training to improve negotiation and mediation skills, on-the-job training, and support to encourage self-employment and micro-enterprise creation.