RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Crisis and Chronicity in the Everyday: Former Child Soldiers in Urban Sierra Leone[1]

Myriam Denov[*] and Andi Buccitelli[*]

The aftermath of war is typically referred to as 'post-conflict', often insinuating a stage of relative calm following a period of armed violence, upheaval and strife. However, the assumption that the post-war context brings forth peace, prosperity and stability negates the reality that conflict, violence and poverty may become embedded in the post-war social fabric. Following its decade long civil war, Sierra Leone continues to contend with a political, social and economic reality marked by widespread poverty, violence, and devastated health and social service systems, highlighting that for many, 'crisis' has in fact become chronic and endemic in the post-war period. Drawing on interviews with 11 former child soldiers living in an urban settlement, this article underscores the blurred distinction between periods of war and peace. Moreover, using the concept of social navigation, the paper explores the strategies the youth deliberately and tactfully employed in negotiating a volatile post-conflict terrain. Their narratives reveal their active, rather than passive, efforts in fostering their own social, economic and physical wellbeing in light of ever-changing, and unstable circumstances.

For those living in contexts of affluence and security, 'crisis' is normally understood as a temporary condition linked to a particularly devastating event whether the loss of a family member, a sexual trauma, a physical assault or a natural disaster (Scheper-Hughes 2008). However, for many people around the world, the reality of 'crisis' is not episodic, but rather endemic and chronic, and shapes and configures all aspects of social life. Crisis thus becomes context and individuals and communities must continually adjust and readjust to the ever-changing and volatile social environment. As Vigh (2008) notes in his discussion of crisis and chronicity:

Instead of being a passing period of chaos, [crisis] settles as a social state. Rather than seeing social processes implode and disintegrate, what we see in situations of prolonged crisis is that the state of emergency becomes a 'situation of emergence' whereby social life is made sense of and unfolds within a terrain of risk and uncertainty (12–13).

The aftermath of war is typically referred to as 'post-conflict', often insinuating a stage of relative calm following a period of armed violence, upheaval and strife. However, the assumption that the post-war context brings forth peace, prosperity and stability negates the reality that conflict, violence and poverty may become embedded in the post-war social fabric. The context of post-conflict

* McGill University, School of Social Work, Canada
  myriam.denov@mcgill.ca, andi.buccitelli@mcgill.ca

Sierra Leone is a case in point. From 1991–2002, Sierra Leone was enveloped in an armed conflict characterized by brutal violence and upheaval. In March 1991, the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia. Despite the RUF's political rhetoric calling for the 'emancipation' and 'democratization' of Sierra Leone, it was extreme forms of violence that pervaded both the formal and informal culture of the RUF (Abdullah 1998). In fact, the RUF's so-called 'democratic revolution' appeared to be fought not through the political realm, but instead through the pillage of rural institutions and industrial assets, and the mass looting of village property. Perhaps most disturbingly, gross human rights violations and brutal forms of physical and sexual violence were committed against the very civilians the RUF was claiming to liberate. This also included extensive violence against children, including the widespread recruitment of children into armed groups.[2] The brutal civil war led to the death of an estimated 70,000 people, the displacement of more than 2 million people, and the amputation of more than 10,000 people (Hanlon 2005). The conflict ultimately left the country with devastated educational and health systems, stockpiles of weapons, and generations of adults and children, both boys and girls, severely affected by the economic, political, sociocultural, psychological and physical health effects of the war.

Despite the end of the civil war in 2002, poverty, violence, and structural challenges remain rampant, highlighting the enduring and endemic 'crisis' in the post-conflict period. For example, although poverty levels have decreased since the beginning of the war in 1991, the percentage of the population living under less than US$2 a day is still strikingly high at 80%[3] (World Bank 2011). This represents an increase in the percentage of the population living under US$2 a day from 75% in 1990 and 76% in 2003 (World Bank 2011). In the realm of health, although the mortality rate among children aged five

and under has moderately decreased from 225 deaths per 1000 in 2003 to 185 deaths per 1000 in 2011, the figure remains much higher than the Sub-Saharan African average of 129.6 (World Bank 2011). Similarly, the prevalence of malnutrition among children aged five and under has not witnessed a significant improvement since the pre-war era. While this figure stood at 25% in 1990 and 2000, it only decreased marginally to 21% in 2008 (World Bank 2011).

Moreover, the country has experienced an increase in the prevalence and incidence of infectious diseases. The prevalence of HIV in the population has increased from 0% in 1990, to 1% in 2003 and 2% in 2011 (World Bank 2011). Furthermore, the number of new cases of tuberculosis per 100, 000 people has increased from 207 in 1990, to 377 in 2000, and to 644 cases in 2009 (World Bank 2011). Sierra Leone's health care system, which had virtually collapsed during the war, continues to be severely constrained in the post-conflict period and with only US$69 spent per person per year, the system's recovery is highly problematic (World Bank 2011). As a report by Médicins Sans Frontières (2006: 3) indicated: 'Sierra Leone's health conditions are still at disaster levels. The slaughter once delivered by machetes and automatic weapons is now more stealthy and routine'. In the realm of education, while primary school enrolment rates and literacy rates among youth have increased over the past decade, this has occurred alongside a drop in the percentage of trained primary school teachers, from 78.9% in 2001 to 48% in 2011, as well as a marginal change in the pupil-to-teacher ratio, from 35 in 1990, to 37 in 2001 to 31 in 2011 (World Bank 2011). Gender-based violence is also a widespread phenomenon in the country that disproportionately affects women. Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs reported to the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)[4] that 67% of women residing in urban areas experienced domestic violence in 2008 (IRIN 2009). Moreover,

local social workers have expressed concern that rape and other forms of sexual violence have become a salient feature of the post-war period (IRIN 2009). These are but a few examples of the embedded post-war 'crisis/chronicity' affecting the everyday lives of many Sierra Leoneans.

Importantly, just as children and youth were deeply implicated and affected by the war, not surprisingly, they continue to be affected in the post-conflict context. For those children formerly associated with armed groups, the reintegration into their communities has been a long and arduous process. Their status as former child soldiers, in particular, frequently adds to the complexity and difficulty of their post-war realities. These youth have faced enormous social stigma in the post-conflict context, all while attempting to cope with the psychosocial repercussions of their wartime experiences (Denov & Maclure 2007; McKay 2010). Moreover, research has documented that former child soldiers in Sierra Leone have faced economic hardship due to structural factors such as a lack of educational and employment opportunities, as well as insufficient access to health care (Betancourt et al. 2008; Denov 2010).

Yet while war-affected youth must negotiate a volatile post-conflict terrain that may be steeped in chronicity, it is important to note that they are in no way powerless within it. The concept of 'social navigation', explored and addressed by Vigh (2006), is increasingly being used by scholars to highlight how youth strategically manoeuvre within contexts of uncertainty, insecurity and other precarious circumstances including war and rapid social change (Denov & Bryan 2012; Vigh 2009). In his discussion of youth and armed conflict in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2006) defines wartime social navigation as the way in which young people living in the context of war assess the changes within their socio-political environment, evaluate the emerging possibilities within this environment, and accordingly, direct their lives in the most beneficial and advantageous ways. Social navigation encapsulates the ways in which agents navigate a terrain that is constantly moving and changing:

> [A]gents seek to draw and actualise their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities and life chances in a shifting and volatile social environment…They navigate an unstable political landscape where the shifts, tows and underlying dangers require strategy and tactics to be constantly tuned to the movement of the immediate socio-political environment as well as to its future unfolding…[Social navigation means] simultaneously navigating the immediate obstacles in front of you, plotting and getting ready to navigate the next and keeping an eye on one's imagined trajectory…Social navigation may thus involve detours, unwilling displacement, losing our way and not least, redrawing trajectories and tactics. Social navigation in this perspective is the tactical movement of agents within a moving element. It is motion within motion (Vigh 2006: 8; 10–11; 14; 131).

Social navigation thus represents the ability to plot, to actualize plotted trajectories, and to relate one's actions to the constant possibility of change. As a conceptual framework, social navigation is useful, particularly when exploring the lives of youth, as it provides an alternative perspective on the intersection between agency, social and structural forces and change. Much academic literature has tended to focus on children's maladaptive, antisocial behaviour in the aftermath of war and disaster, as well as negative physical and mental health outcomes (Derluyn et al. 2008; Hodes et al. 2008). Alternatively, the concept of social navigation dispels portrayals of youth, particularly war-affected youth, as powerless, passive, and pathological (Denov 2011; Denov & Bryan 2012; Langevang 2008; Vigh 2006). Significantly, the

notion can be helpful in unveiling the intricacies of youth's lives, which often involve a continuous assessment of changes and possibilities in one's surroundings, paralleled by a constant adjustment of one's tactics and strategies. Through this process, social actors, including youth, seek to navigate their way to opportunities for social and economic stability and mobility. The concept makes it possible to understand the ways agents move within, and are simultaneously moved by, the social terrain. Thus, the concept of social navigation offers a framework enabling a greater focus on how people move and manage within situations of uncertainty and social flux (Vigh 2009).

While authors have explored young people's social navigation tactics and agency in relation to the wartime context (Utas 2005; Vigh 2006), less attention has been paid to social navigation in the post-war period. Yet while war embodies a terrain in extreme motion, which makes navigation difficult, the post-war context may be equally dynamic, volatile and precarious, making careful navigation essential.

Using the framework of social navigation, this paper traces the post-conflict lives and experiences of 11 participants formerly associated with an armed group in Sierra Leone, 7 males and 4 females, living in the Freetown settlement of Beledu.[5] The paper outlines the everyday challenges and opportunities in Beledu, alongside the ways in which the youth consciously and deliberately navigated the precarious terrain and endemic 'crisis' that surrounded them. Far from being passive or powerless, and despite having to contend with a challenging context and a complex social status, these youth thoughtfully, strategically and actively assessed and engaged with their surroundings in order to enhance their economic, social, and physical wellbeing.

Methodology: Interviews with Youth in Beledu

This study is part of a larger research project supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, exploring the long-term reintegration of child soldiers in multiple regions of Sierra Leone. Several groups of former child soldiers were part of the study (Denov et al. 2012). This paper focuses on a group of 11 youth participants (7 male and 4 female) living in Beledu, a settlement community in Freetown.

It is important to first address the realities of the Beledu community in order to understand the context in which the youth participants were living. Beledu is a bustling and densely populated settlement exhibiting numerous socio-economic activities and includes petty traders, tin-smiths, builders, fruit sellers, tailors, hairdressers and fishermen. A community struggling with massive unemployment, most of these businesses have been created as a result of the lack of formal employment opportunities and severe poverty prevails. Housing in Beledu tends to be made of rusty corrugated metal sheets. While the settlement is lively and dynamic, there are important public health concerns. The population density, the closeness of dwellings, inadequate sanitation facilities, and stagnant drains increase the settlement's vulnerability to the outbreak and spread of infectious disease. The proximity to the sea is also a major threat to the very existence of the settlement, most especially, if the sea overflows at its banks.

The first author was initially introduced to the Beledu youth through local social workers who were engaged in community outreach and support in Beledu. Open-ended, qualitative interviews with the eleven participants were conducted by the first author over a three year period between 2008 and 2011. A key aim of the interviews was to gain an understanding of participants' post-conflict lives, reintegration experiences, and life in Beledu, but also their reflections and interpretations of these experiences. Questions posed to participants explored their lives and experiences since the end of the war, as well as their daily lives in Beledu, particularly in relation to livelihoods, social relations, community opportunities and challenges, and future goals. Interviews, which were audio-

recorded with permission, were conducted in Krio and English and later transcribed.

No interview was conducted without obtaining the full and informed consent of each participant. Participants were assured that all information gathered would remain confidential and used for research purposes only. There were, however, important risks to consider. Those who were still suffering from the trauma of war and its related effects could experience heightened anxiety by speaking about its effects or implications in detail. Individuals who were coming to terms with their experiences of violence could have been afraid to reopen old wounds. We were thus highly aware of the potential for re-victimization. Support structures were put into place to ensure that participants were provided with ongoing support in the aftermath of interviews. This came in the form of local social workers and community members meeting with participants following interviews, in both the short-term and long-term.

As with all self-report data, the interviews with participants were invariably affected by their memory of events, as well as their willingness to divulge personal information. It is possible that participants may have altered or exaggerated aspects of their stories. This may be especially apparent in post-war contexts where individuals may be increasingly cognizant that emphasizing their helplessness, dependence and victims status, particularly to outsiders and humanitarian workers, may be crucial to obtaining aid and assistance (Honwana 2006). The potential flaws of self-disclosure must therefore be taken into account when considering participants' stories. However, these potential limitations were offset by the fact that local social workers we were working alongside had had previous professional encounters with the youth and were aware of their post-war experiences and daily lives in Beledu. Through these local social workers, we were thus able to corroborate participants' narratives and their difficult living circumstances.

The mean age of participants was 18 years old at the time of the first interview in 2008,

while the age range was from 16 to 23 years. All respondents had been forcibly recruited by an armed group when they were very young (ranging between 7 and 14 years of age), and remained with the armed group for periods ranging from three months to approximately 3 years. Only one of the 11 participants had benefited from a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program in the aftermath of the war. Two of the eleven youths had chosen to maintain contact with surviving family members. Nine of the eleven youth reported being homeless and slept in abandoned public showers, or outside on market tables in the community, even during the rainy season. While four of the eleven youths had been able to return to school since the end of the war, none of the four reported attending classes regularly due to lack of funds to pay for uniforms, books and tuition.

Having set the context for the volatile terrain the youth traversed on a daily basis, we can now delve more deeply into the various forms of insecurity these youth contended with alongside the creative strategies they developed in order to maximize opportunities for social and economic mobility as well as security.

Everyday on the Margins: Life in Beledu

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that 'the state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule (Benjamin 1999: 248).

Nine of the eleven youth participants were not originally from Beledu, but deliberately came to the settlement in the aftermath of the war. Many of the youth chose to live in Beledu because it is known as a place that welcomes and provides refuge for those who are homeless, whether young or old. As these participants noted:

> Beledu is a place of refuge. It is where people in Sierra Leone go when they

are homeless. It is a community that welcomes others. There is very little opportunity in Beledu [and it is] known as a place for bad and shady people. But I don't want the community to be branded like that (male participant).

I have no family or relations here in Beledu. I was 10 years old when I came out of the bush in Makeni. I had been in the bush with the RUF for a year. When I escaped the RUF, I was trying to find food and managed to find some food on a farm. I then came to Freetown. [How were you able to get to Freetown?] I was alone and crying. I explained to a woman who I met on the street that I couldn't find my parents and that I wanted to go to Freetown. She paid for my transport to come to Freetown. When I was in Freetown, I met a boy who spoke my language. I asked him where I could find street kids. He took me to Beledu. I have been living here for 6 years now. I'm now 16 (male participant).

Other participants strategically came to Freetown (and then to Beledu) at the end of the war to ensure their post-war anonymity. This occurred largely in cases of former combatants who sought refuge in large urban areas to blend in and avoid potential confrontation and retaliation for their wartime affiliations and actions. As this participant noted:

I don't want people to know that I was an ex-combatant. A few people from Kenema know me and that I was with the [armed group], for those that don't know, I will never tell. In fact, that was the reason that I came to Freetown – to be sure that I couldn't be recognized (male participant).

Prior to exploring the ways the Beledu youth innovatively negotiated the social terrain before them, it is important to first understand, from their perspective, the nature of

the insecurities they faced. Daily life within the Beledu community represented a continuous struggle. The chronic issues that participants reported included food and health insecurity, homelessness, conflict with the law, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and ongoing violence. This section highlights the embedded crisis and chronicity in the everyday, and the ways in which life in Beledu unfolded within a terrain of risk and uncertainty.

Economic (In)Security: Employment, Education & Uncertainty

A key preoccupation of participants was economic survival and security. The youth reported that alongside anonymity, they had chosen to settle in Beledu because of key economic activities that transpired in the community, such as the busy market where they could find odd jobs. However, they experienced profound difficulties in obtaining long-term, sustainable livelihoods. All participants reported not being able to raise enough money to meet their basic needs. The youth reported that, on average, they earned 3,000–5,000 leones per day, equivalent to less than one US dollar. The youth reported the various ways, both legal and illegal, in which they sustained themselves, including stealing, gambling, carrying loads of heavy goods, domestic work, and sex work:

I carry loads for people. I get about 5,000 leones per day for the work (male participant).

I help people wash their dishes and also help the women that sell cooked rice. I help them serve their food and when they are done, they give us the remaining food to sell, and the money is ours. Also, the older guys send us to do their errands like buying them cigarettes and drugs and they give us money. I earn about 4,000 leones per day (male participant).

The only way that I am able to make money is through stealing. I steal most-

ly in the marketplace where it is very crowded …I steal food items and then I sell them (male participant).

To make money, I do prostitution. I usually make 10,000 leones per night. I don't have more than 2 clients per night…Sometimes the clients have sex with you and then they don't want to pay you (female participant).

All participants emphasized their desire to continue their education and described education as a pathway to economic and social advancement. It became evident that education constituted a collective value that all participants shared, but that was largely inaccessible.

I feel sad seeing my peers going to school while I am not able to. Most of the kids in Beledu want to go to school but can't afford it[6] (female participant).

…I want to go back to school. I was enrolled in school this year, but I had to leave during the second term. The person that was helping pay for my fees left the country and I have no way of continuing. If I go back to school, I will be able to improve my status in life… (male participant).

Given their inability to attend school and find work, all the youth reported experiencing boredom. Feelings of stagnation and uncertainty about the future were common sentiments among the youth:

I do nothing all day. I go and sit by the showers all day. There is nothing to do here. I sleep in the showers. It is a big compound, but it has no roof, which is not good in the rainy season (female participant).

My life has not changed since the last time we met. I'm doing the same work. I sweep the marketplace and collect 100 leones from the market women to give to my boss. I get 5,000

leones per day for this work. I'm concerned that my life is not moving forward or advancing. I'm just not able to accumulate any money to go to school (male participant).

In a minority of cases, the youth managed to accumulate money; however, they were compelled to give it to an adult for safekeeping. These participants explained:

You aren't able to keep or save any money. If you have any money in your pocket, during the night someone will come by and tear open your pocket with a razor blade and will steal it (male participant).

At one time, I gave 150,000 leones [approx. 60 USD] to a man to keep for me. It was supposed to be for my schooling. But he ate the money [used it for his own purposes]. Now I do nothing but drag magnets through the drain to gather coins (male participant).

Physical (In)Security: Homelessness, Violence and the Everyday

Participants' inability to secure a reliable source of income and to save for the future, alongside the harsh living conditions in the Beledu community, rendered it difficult for the youth to feed themselves and to maintain their overall physical health.

I'm not able to eat everyday and some nights I go to sleep with an empty stomach. I am always hungry (male participant).

I earn 3–5,000 leones carrying loads for people. With that, I eat 1,000 leones of rice in the morning, and 1,500 [leones worth] of rice in the evening (male participant).

[We sleep] close to the wharf in Beledu. Children [living in the community] go to this place to play and it affects their health. Some houses, such as my own, are very close to this place

and it is not good for our health either. We live where the pigs live. Kids get sick and sometimes die (female participant).

Homelessness was a major preoccupation among the youth. Nine of the eleven youth slept in public showers, on tables in the marketplace, and in abandoned vehicles. Moreover, local police would regularly patrol the community at night, and arrest and incarcerate anyone sleeping in a public place. These young people described the realities of homelessness, alongside its links to the criminal justice system:

When I was first on the street, I had nowhere to sleep except to look for empty and abandoned vehicles in garages. I was sleeping in vehicles. I became ill many times but there was no one to give me medical support. It really takes the grace of God to survive in such circumstances (female participant).

There are so many other boys that sleep in the marketplace on top of tables…But you don't sleep like you're at home. You have to wake up every half an hour to check around you and see if the police are around. Usually all the noise around here will wake you up. I am never able to sleep deeply, which means that you are always tired. I try to stay in the same spot all night, but we always have to be on alert and be able to move quickly if the police come. Sometimes, someone will yell to warn others that the police are coming. You are half asleep and you have to start running. That's when many of us get injured. Last time, I got a really serious cut on my back when I tried to jump a fence when the police were chasing me… (male participant).

I've been arrested for loitering [sleeping in the street]. I have been imprisoned several times for it. One time I was in prison for an entire week. They beat me and I received food only once per

day and no water to drink. The cells are very small – they are 6 by 6 and there are usually 5 to 6 people to a cell. They put me in a cell with adults and the adults beat the younger ones. Because the cell is so small, not everyone is able to lie down to sleep. The adults get to lie down, but the big people don't let the kids lie down. So I ended up having to sleep sitting down (male participant).

All of the youth also spoke of the violence that pervaded their daily lives. Violence, whether physical, sexual, or psychological, was reported as regular occurrences, with participants being both victims and perpetrators:

I've probably stabbed others about 20 times, and I've been stabbed twice. I'm not afraid of being stabbed, but you have to be prepared at all times (male participant).

The streets are dangerous here [in Beledu], especially at night, and you can easily get attacked… I've been raped once (female participant).

I avoid going to the wharf – I don't like the beefing and fighting. Even during football matches, if we play a game and the match ends badly…sometimes people will pull out weapons like knives, razor blades and bottles. It makes me afraid to play football (male participant).

Psycho-Social (In)Security: Marginality and Stigma

Particularly important to participants' long-term community reintegration, safety and security was their status as former child soldiers. Much research has documented the psychosocial impacts of former child soldiers' wartime experiences, as well as the potential for post-war community rejection and stigma given their wartime affiliations and actions (Boothby, Crawford & Halperin 2006; Denov 2006; Williamson 2006; Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, Williams, & Ellis 2010; McKay

2010; McKay 2007). While the war has now been over for more than a decade, the fear of stigma, retaliation, and rejection continued to preoccupy participants, and was a salient component of their every day post-war realities. As this participant noted:

> Because of what I did during the war, I know I have a stain. Only God will forgive me for my wrong deeds. I regret all that I did and all that happened (male participant).

Participants reported that because of their former status as child soldiers, Beledu community members were often suspicious of them, labelled them as 'dangerous' and 'troublesome', and sometimes excluded them from community activities. Participants believed that while all people living in Beledu could be considered marginal, as a result of participants' status as former child soldiers, they were even more marginal – at the very bottom of the settlement's social hierarchy. Participant's believed that this marginality had an impact on their ability to achieve social and economic security. Given the fear of stigma and marginality, as well as their search for safety and security, participants made great efforts to conceal their former wartime affiliations. As these participants noted:

> I won't tell anyone about my past [as a former combatant]. I don't trust people. I want to be safe (female participant).
>
> I'm still afraid to tell people I was with the RUF – I'm afraid they will kill me. It happened to a boy I knew. He said he was RUF and they killed him (female participant).
>
> I don't want people to know that I was an ex-combatant. A few people from Kenema know me and that I was with the [armed group]. For those that don't know, I will never tell. In fact, that was the reason that I left Kenema and came to Freetown – to be sure that I couldn't be recognized (male participant).

In contrast to other youth living in the settlement, the participants thus had an additional factor to navigate: their former identity as child soldiers. As the above statements suggest, many participants greatly feared reprisal and discrimination on account of their former affiliation with armed groups. This reality, it seems, required the youth to exert some form of hypervigilance as they navigated the settlement and interacted with others within it. According to the youth, failure to do so could render the youth's realities more precarious and increasingly insecure.

The youth in Beledu faced enormous challenges on a daily basis, specifically related to their ability to ensure their own economic, physical and psycho-social security. What compounded the situation is the inextricable link and cyclical interaction between these forms of (in)security. On the one hand, although many of the youth successfully found some means by which to raise money, the uncertainty of their surroundings (e.g. inability to securely safeguard funds, dangerous forms of employment, violence from police and others, etc.) threatened their advancement towards economically and physically secure realities. On the other hand, threats to their physical and psycho-social security, including violence, social stigma, crime, homelessness and poor living conditions, prevented the youth from accumulating funds for long-term investments (e.g. education) and restricted their economic, social and even physical mobility. In this regard, the precariousness of the post-conflict terrain, in conjunction with the effects of their wartime experiences and former child soldier status, increased the youths' susceptibility to becoming entangled in vicious cycles of insecurity.

Navigating Crisis and Chronicity
For the youth participants in Beledu, life is characterized by an ongoing struggle to get by in the face of persistent hardship and uncertainty. And yet, in the context of great insecurity, instability and endemic crisis, the youth managed and survived. They were not

merely passive victims of unstable surroundings, but instead found meaningful ways to attempt to ensure their safety and survival. However, this required significant navigation skills, and the ability to plot, traverse and negotiate a precarious and volatile terrain.

While the previous section detailed the forms of insecurity and chronicity in the lives of the youth, drawing upon young people's narratives and reflections, the following section explores the ways in which the Beledu youth negotiated and navigated this highly precarious and volatile post-war terrain. Despite significant structural barriers, the youth carefully, thoughtfully, and deliberately navigated post-war life in Beledu. While by no means a straightforward or linear process, navigation was accomplished through finding and maintaining a *bra*, a *sisi*, and ensuring peer and collective support. These strategies and tactics are explored further below.

Finding and Maintaining a 'Bra'

In a context of profound insecurity, the participants sought out ways to ensure their protection in Beledu. One of the ways was to find a '*bra*'. In Krio, Sierra Leone's lingua franca, '*bra*' refers to an informal relationship between an adult male and a youth (whether male or female). The *bra* is normally older, and more financially secure than the youth. In Beledu, a *bra* often provided physical protection to the youth and, in turn, the youth was required to work for the *bra*. These youth spoke of the importance of having a *bra* as well as their role and function in their everyday lives:

> All girls must get some sort of protection or someone to fight for them. If a street boy beats you, you need another street boy to fight for you (female participant).
>
> My bra protects me by advising me to stop fighting and stop making trouble. When people threaten me he will fight them and even take them to the police. If I ever get into trouble and end up at the police station, he will come

to bail me out. He always protects me when there is a problem. I have had several police cases and he was always there by my side if I had a problem (male participant).

> My bra is the market chairman and he gives me a place to sleep. He gives me advice and protects me. He gives me money when I clean the market place for him (male participant).

The *bra's* significance is illustrated by this participant who was left vulnerable following the death of his *bra*:

> I had a bra and he provided me with protection. But he died and when he died I lost my protection. After he died, people came around me and tore up all my clothes and took my shoes. I didn't know where to sleep and I had no protection. Big men would come around and ask me for money and they would beat me up because I didn't have any. I also didn't have a place to wash. After a while, another man came around to see me when I was sitting by myself. He asked if I wanted to be one of his boys. I now live in the public toilet. My job is to stand outside it and collect money from people who use the toilet. I have to collect 40,000 leones per day to give to my boss [bra]. Anything on top of that is mine. Also, sometimes my bra's wife gives me food and does some laundry for me (male participant).

While the *bra* inevitably provided forms of protection and stability within the context of Beledu, the power dynamics and patrimonial relations reflected in the relationship must be considered. The interconnected realms of violence, oppression, and patronage feature prominently in Sierra Leone's history (Murphy 2003). As Jackson (2006: 101) has noted: 'political patronage…has been a defining feature of Sierra Leone over the last 20 years, in that exclusion from patronage networks created the raw material for the violence of

the 1990s'. Over time, the institutionalization of what Reno (1995) has referred to as the 'shadow state' characterized government conduct and activities. Through a patrimonial system of rationed favours, theft of public funds, illicit payments, as well as bribes, state corruption became institutionalized and is regarded as an important antecedent to the war. Murphy (2012) argues that patrimonial politics – represented by discretionary, autocratic power of big men – not only formed the pre-war conditions triggering violent conflict in Sierra Leone, but also shaped the organizational structure of the military regimes during the civil war. Perhaps not surprisingly, such patrimonial relations continue to be deeply entrenched in everyday informal relations in the post-conflict period and are evident in the power dynamics in Beledu between participants and their *bra*. Participants explained the relationship with their *bra* as one of 'master-servant' where there was a clear power differential, as well as an exchange of services. In most cases, the young person was obliged to work for their *bra* and give him a portion of the money that they would earn each day. In exchange, the young person would be provided with protection from potential violence and abuse, and if the young person had an altercation with police or was in conflict with the law, the *bra* would advocate on the young person's behalf and provide bail money to be released from police custody. These participants explained the relationship further:

> I am his borbor [boy]. That means he is my boss and saves me from problems. If I have money, I give him a share of it… It's like a master-boy relationship but he also protects me like a father (male participant).
>
>   My bra sort of owns me. He gives me protection and I give money to him when I have it. He also gives me advice as to what to do and what not to do. If I'm in a fight, he will pay or act on my behalf. He offers a lot, but he expects

a lot in return. My bra doesn't love me like a father – a father you don't have to work for! (male participant).

Some participants knew for certain, while others merely suspected, that their *bras* had been former combatants and even commanders during the war. In this respect, the youth's subservient and power-entrenched relationships with their *bras* can also be seen as in many ways replicating the militarized wartime structures of armed groups in the post-conflict period.

  Although the relationship with one's *bra* was hierarchical and steeped in unequal power relations, finding a *bra* nonetheless represented a form of social navigation on the part of the youth, as it involved plotting and actualizing a more secure future. It took skill and foresight to find a *bra* and the youth maintained that it was a deliberate tactic to ensure they found work, and importantly, protection in Beledu:

> [Without a bra] you are left unprotected and there is a good chance that people will come and harm you. You really cannot be alone and without a bra here…there is no alternative, you have to have a bra (male participant).

Yet while offering protection to the youth, many participants also reported abuse, threats, and mistreatment by their *bra*, particularly if they resisted his orders or failed to provide the money the *bra* expected:

> If I refuse to do what he tells me, he threatens me…If it happens to be the day when you are supposed to give your bra his two thousand leones, and you don't have it, he would slap and kick me to give him the money (male participant).
>
>   My former bra was very wicked… He would kick me and slap me and beat me in public. People would try to intervene, but he would yell at them to go away. He would say: 'Don't get

involved, he is my bobor! [boy]' (male participant).

Reflecting their ability to navigate and plot a new and safer course in a volatile and changing environment, in such cases, some participants actively sought out a new *bra* – one that they hoped would treat them better. Leaving a *bra* was often a risky step, as the potential for retaliation from the previous *bra* was always a possibility. In these situations, some participants negotiated ways to protect themselves either by strategically avoiding their former *bra*, or asking their new *bra* to provide protection from the previous one. These participants explain the complexity around leaving an abusive *bra*:

> *Eventually, after being abused by [my bra] for a long time, I told him that he was too wicked and that I was going to leave him. I then asked a new bra to take me on. I was afraid of retaliation from the old bra, but my new bra told me that he would take care of it. I have now managed to come up with a specific route to go home so that I don't pass where the old bra stays. I want to avoid confrontation (male participant).*
>
> *My current bra beats me for not finishing my sweeping before dawn. If I don't, he gets very angry and says 'you have a free place to sleep!' and then beats me… I do think about finding a new bra because sometimes I do my sweeping job as agreed and he doesn't even pay me. But for now, I'm sticking with him. I'm not sure if the new bra would be different or maybe he would be worse. Better to stay with the devil you know than one you don't know (male participant).*

After assessing their current situation and future possibilities, some youth decided they would be better off without a *bra*. This usually occurred after a lengthy period of time, involving much reflection and contemplation:

> *I was with a bra before – I was selling jamba [marijuana] for him. But one night we were raided by the police and I was arrested. I decided that I didn't want to stay with that bra. The bra is for protection and he helps avoid conflict and fighting. But mine didn't give me the right advice – whatever he told me was in his own interest and not mine. I won't get another bra until I find one that will advise me well. I feel better now that I don't have that bra…I believe this life is better for me. I don't fight so I do not need someone to save me from trouble. Most of the bras give bad advice to their borbors [boys](male participant).*
>
> *I did have a bra before but he sent his boys to sell marijuana and I didn't like that. Also, if you decided not to sell, he would beat you up. I made a decision not to have a bra. I was with him for 1 month and then I left. [Were you afraid to leave him?] I wasn't afraid, but I was staying with him, so it meant that I had to leave his place and was then on the street. I now sleep in the streets. I put cardboard over the drain and sleep there…Sometimes, I do regret leaving the bra, because he used to buy me medicine when I was sick. But then I think about the fact that he used to slap, kick and hit me and even threaten to hurt me with a bottle, and I know that I am better off (male participant).*

The relationship between the youth and their *bra* can be said to represent a social form of 'petty patronage'. While these relationships may operate at the lower echelons of the patronage pyramid, the *bra* nonetheless employs limited resources to incorporate the labour and loyalty of dependents. For the majority of the participants, the relationship with the *bra* was nonetheless key to ensuring increased security and survival in Beledu. It was regarded by participants as a 'necessary evil' to survive Beledu's embedded structural

violence and uncertainty. Finding, maintaining and, sometimes, leaving a *bra*, highlight one of the ways in which the youth navigated their post-war lives in Beledu. However, in a context of volatility, new opportunities and obstacles frequently emerged demanding that the youth reconsider long-term goals and develop new situation-appropriate tactics and strategies.

The Importance of a 'Sisi'

As noted earlier, the youth in the study articulated that food insecurity and money management were issues of great concern. They reported being unable to assure regular meals and often went hungry. Moreover, if they managed to accumulate small amounts of money, they were unable to save it. The youth also came to realize that their *bra* was unable, or unwilling, to fully address these needs. In response, the youth forged strategic relationships with women in the community who could provide increased security in the realms of food, paid work and money management. The youth referred to these women as their '*sisi*'. In Krio, a *sisi* literally means 'sister'. In Beledu, a '*sisi*' refers to an adult woman who cares for children (male or female) who are not biologically related to her. The youth often performed domestic tasks, such as cooking, laundering or carrying heavy loads for the *sisi*, mostly in exchange for food. All participants reported having, at some point, both a *bra* and a *sisi*. The importance of the *sisi*, and the mutual exchange that was intrinsic to participants' relationship with their *sisi* was explained by these participants:

> I do domestic work for my sisi, I fetch water and she gives me food. I need the sisi as the bra cannot do everything (female participant).
>
> I have a sisi. She is a trader and lives in the old wharf. I clean her place, help her cook and she gives me 3,000 leones [1 US dollar] per week (female participant).

In addition to providing food and, at times, paid domestic work, many of the youth relied on the *sisi* to safeguard any money that they were able to accumulate:

> My sisi also keeps my money. You can't keep money on you because people will steal it from you when you are sleeping or pickpocket you. So I give it to my sisi and she keeps it for me. I have been helping her with her loads for over two years now, and I have not been stealing from her like other street boys. So she gives me food while I help her with work (male participant).

In some cases, in return for the food and financial support granted by the *sisi*, the (male) youth were required to provide the *sisi* with protection, highlighting the gendered nature of power and protection in Beledu:

> Being a sisi means that she treats me like her own son…She is responsible for me…she feeds me and takes care of me. In return, I provide protection to her (male participant).

The youth actively assessed and ultimately recognized the instrumental and intrinsic value in having a *sisi*, particularly her role in assuring increased food and economic security, as well as longer-term planning for the future.

Peer Support and Group Collectivity

Through their peer group, many former child soldiers have sought safety through a 'community of sameness' (Goldenberg 2009: 24). Given the precariousness of their living situations, and their shared status as former child soldiers, participants reported working collaboratively to provide one another with psycho-social support and protection. In a context of economic and social uncertainty and ongoing marginality, their peer group provided a sense of family, support and collectivity. These participants explained:

We are like a family now. If we see someone being taken advantage of, we will all go to fight for them (male participant).

When I don't want to see my bra, I try to keep a low profile. I tell my friends that I'm avoiding my bra and they will help me with temporary shelter. They will also help me to find another bra (male participant).

Whoever is collecting money at the public toilet that day will share what they earn that day with the others. Also, when anyone has a problem with the police, like when [another participant] was jailed, we helped get him get the money to bail him out (female participant).

This sense of collectivity among our group of participants spanned many realms including economic, social and psychological. Participants reported working together to generate money, to teach one another survival strategies and the 'ropes' of street life, and to ensure each other's protection:

Our target was to steal from those passing by. We either stole their bags away or stole from their pockets. I learned to steal on the streets – my friends taught me…When I first came to Beledu, people stole a lot of things from me. Later, I was taught how to pick pocket from passers-by. My friends taught me how to steal bags, and how to pass on the stolen property to another person who kept it safe without the owner seeing it. We work together when we snatch something from someone. We give it to another person who will run with it. My friends taught me everything… I was watching their steps and later, they introduced me to the game (male participant).

It was my friend that suggested that I try prostitution. The money we earn we put together to cook. We also go out to find clients together and are there

to protect each other. For example, I made an agreement with a man that he had to pay 4,000 leones for 1 round of sex. Then he finished and wanted another round. I refused. He started to beat me. When something like this happens, my friend is around and she will find the police to come and help me (female participant).

The youth also sought peer-protection through their involvement in gangs:

The gang is like a form of protection. It's necessary to have your own group. With them, you are free to walk around. Also, if I get arrested for loitering, then the group finds someone to help me out and find a way to get bail money (male participant).

Despite limited opportunities for security and socioeconomic advancement, the youth proved to be extremely innovative in searching for and building their own paths in order to maximize their basic needs and resources. By establishing strategic links with *bras*, *sisis* as well as one another, the youth were able to engage in economic and social activities which afforded them – albeit extremely limited – funds, savings, food, shelter, social acceptance, protection, and more generally, security. Even as these social arrangements transformed from being relatively advantageous to deleterious or vice versa, the youth carefully assessed their current position, the feasibility of alternative trajectories, as well as the possible consequences of shifting their environment in another direction. In this sense, regardless of their situation, the youth seemed to constantly exercise their 'third eye' in order to detect and act upon social or economic opportunities in their environment.

Conclusion
The case of the Beledu youth contributes to our knowledge and understanding of youth and post-conflict societies in multiple ways. First, the case of the Beledu youth sheds

light on the 'crisis/chronicity' debate, underscoring the reality that in many contexts, the line demarcating 'war' from 'peace' is often blurred and hazy. Second, the Beledu youth challenge conceptualizations of war-affected youth as passive and powerless in the face of severe hardship and volatility. Instead of passively accepting the multiple stressors and threats to their economic, physical and psycho-social security, the Beledu youth carefully assessed their past and present situations in order to steer their lives in more advantageous ways. Finally, the study demonstrates the utility of the concept of social navigation when considering the post-conflict lives of war-affected youth, as it facilitates a more complex reading of their lives and experiences. These elements are addressed below.

Post-war settings, such as Sierra Leone, can, in many ways, be just as volatile as landscapes steeped in conflict. Much like during the civil war, post-conflict Sierra Leone, and urban settlements such as Beledu, are often embedded in crisis and chronicity. They are characterized by violence, unemployment, crime, poor health and minimal opportunities for educational, social and economic advancement. The lives of the youth in Beledu and their struggles to achieve economic, psycho-social and physical security, highlight the chronic and lasting impacts of the war. The youth contended with powerful structural violence and barriers in the postwar period, including homelessness, physical and sexual violence, fear, crime, abuse, exploitation, food insecurity, lack of educational opportunities, and joblessness. Their identity as former child soldiers heightened the precariousness of their situation, as they feared prejudice, stigma and retaliation from those around them. In this sense, despite the termination of the war, and numerous formal post-war interventions aimed at reconciliation (such as the establishment of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programming), these interventions did little, according to the par-

ticipants, to dismantle the stigma associated with their former status as child soldiers and to increase their socio-economic security. The case of the Beledu youth ultimately demonstrates that the implied meaning of 'post-conflict', and its common association with stability, peace and growing prosperity, may be a misnomer, ultimately masking the poverty, violence, and uncertainty that has continued to affect their lives despite the (official) end of the war. As seen in this particular context, for the youth of Beledu, crisis has in fact become chronic and endemic.

The case of the Beledu youth also shows that despite the everyday challenges, insecurity and the volatility inherent to 'chronicity', participants actively assessed their surroundings and pursued opportunities to alter their situations in beneficial ways. Whether it was forging connections to a *bra*, *sisi* or among one another, the participants mindfully and tactfully navigated their social world in order to foster strategic social relations and economic opportunities.

The concept of social navigation is particularly helpful in disentangling the complex processes that push and pull these youth in various directions. Specifically, social navigation allows us to better observe the interaction between individual agency, and structural forces as well as how all these factors play out in a context of instability and uncertainty. In many instances, some of the youth oriented themselves to positions that proved advantageous and stable for varying lengths of time while others, despite their active efforts, found themselves in cycles of seemingly perpetual instability and insecurity. The experiences of the youth in Beledu underscores the dynamism of social navigation as well as the capacity of individuals to engage with their environments and surrounding structures in order to purposefully advance their situations and longer-term objectives. Moreover, this study has demonstrated that social navigation is not only a useful and relevant concept to examine young people's experiences during war, but also their lives in the post-war period.

Although the lens of social navigation has helped to uncover how youth in Beledu move and cope within a continuously shifting environment, more research using this framework is needed in order to better deconstruct the complex relationship between youths' individual identities and the political and social landscapes they are confronted with in the post-war setting. Particularly, it will be paramount for future studies to delve more deeply into how the intersectionality of subordinate group identities (e.g. gender, former child soldier, homeless youth, etc.) plays out in a context of flux. Finally, future research would do well to examine the applicability of social navigation to multiple contexts. It would be important to explore the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate and navigate other post-war terrains, as well as highlight any similarities and differences given each context's unique historical, cultural, and geo-political realities.

Notes

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[2] During the war, several armed groups recruited children into their ranks including the RUF, the Civil Defense Forces, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, and the Sierra Leonean Army.

[3] This figure is based on 2005 international prices (Purchasing Power Parity) (World Bank 2011).

[4] Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) is the humanitarian news and analysis service of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

[5] The name of the community has been changed to ensure anonymity.

[6] School fees cost approximately US$60 per year.

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