Engaging war affected youth through photography: Photovoice with former child soldiers in Sierra Leone

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Photovoice is a community based participatory research method that combines photography, community awareness building, group discussions, and social action. Photovoice seeks to enable both individuals and groups, particularly those facing marginalisation and disempowerment, to record and reflect on community strengths and challenges, through photography. This paper presents a Photovoice project, conducted with a group of former child soldiers living in urban Sierra Leone, exploring their post war lives and reintegration experiences. In addition to addressing how the project was conceptualised, developed and implemented, the authors also present the youth's photographs, highlighting the key issues and reintegration realities emerging from their images. The paper then discusses the strengths and challenges of the Photovoice method experience, and concludes with a set of recommendations for future initiatives.

Keywords: community based approaches, former child soldiers, Photovoice, Sierra Leone

Introduction

Arts based initiatives have become increasingly prevalent in rehabilitation and interventions with war affected populations. Emerging literature has begun to highlight the benefits of using arts based approaches with war affected youth, whether drawing, painting, theatre, dance, or music (Harris, 2007; Gangi & Barowsky, 2009; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005; Lacroix &

Rousseau, 2007). It has been suggested that such approaches allow children and youth to represent their experiences of war and political violence within contexts of reduced stress, and may in fact promote activism and empowerment (Harris, 2007; Moletsane et al., 2007). In a similar vein, the use of photography has increasingly been recognised as a means of empowerment among marginalised youth and *'groups of people who do not normally get to speak'* (Mitchell, 2011). Within the toolbox of photographic methods, Photovoice has emerged as an important methodological and community empowerment tool.

Photovoice is a community based participatory research method that combines photography, building community awareness, group discussions, and social action (Wang & Burris, 1994; 1997). First developed and implemented by Wang and Burris in their research on women villagers in rural China, the method draws from what Spence (1995) describes as *'community photography'*, a way in which ordinary people photograph each other and their social environment. Photovoice has three main objectives. First, it seeks to enable individuals and groups, particularly those facing marginalisation and disempowerment, to record and reflect upon their community's strengths and challenges using photography. Second, using group discussions of participants' photographs, Photovoice aims to promote critical dialogue and knowledge of important

community issues. Finally, by disseminating participants' photographs, normally via a photographic exhibition, Photovoice seeks to reach policy makers who have the power to implement changes within that community (Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice has been positioned by de Lange, Mitchell and Stuart (2007) within the broader category of *'visual methodologies for social change'* and they document the transformative possibilities of *'engaging community members in producing their own visual images through taking photographs'*.

Since its initial use with women in rural China, Photovoice has since been adapted to a range of populations and communities, including the homeless (Wang et al., 2000), older adults with chronic pain (Wang & Baker, 2006), children with autism (Carnahan, 2006), mothers with learning difficulties (Booth & Booth, 2003), and refugee populations (Green & Kloos, 2009). However, the use of Photovoice with war affected youth has received minimal attention.

This paper presents a Photovoice project conducted with a group of former child soldiers living in urban Sierra Leone, exploring their post war lives and reintegration experiences. In addition to addressing how the project was conceptualised, developed and implemented, a selection of the youth's photographs is presented, highlighting the key issues and reintegration realities emerging from their images. The paper then discusses the strengths and challenges of the Photovoice experience, and concludes with a set of recommendations for future Photovoice initiatives.

Former child soldiers and long-term reintegration in Sierra Leone: a place for Photovoice?

Sierra Leone's decade long civil war (1991–2002) had a devastating impact on its population, leading to the death of an estimated 70,000 people, the displacement of more than 2 million, more than 10,000 people subjected to amputations, and the destruction of the country's limited infrastructure. During the conflict, thousands of children[1] (boys and girls) were recruited by force and non-force into numerous armed groups. In many cases, the acquiescence to the norms of violence and terror, either as aggressors or as unwilling victims, became the children's only recourse for survival.

Within the post conflict period, the rehabilitation and reintegration of Sierra Leone's former child soldiers has been an ongoing challenge. Within a short time span, former child soldiers have been faced with the challenge of being reintegrated back into norms and institutions from which they had been isolated, often for years. Many have faced social rejection from family and community, as well as economic hardship due to a lack of educational and employment opportunities (Denov, 2010a,b). While some research on child soldier reintegration, within a variety of contexts, has demonstrated that many have been accepted back into their communities and become productive, capable and caring adults who actively engaged in the collective affairs of their communities (Boothby, 2006; Klasen et al., 2010), other research has highlighted the ongoing struggles associated with post war reintegration (Betancourt et al., 2008; Denov, 2011). As a result, the long-term reintegration of former child soldiers, in contexts like Sierra Leone, continues to be an area worthy of exploration.

Origins of the project: former child soldiers in Beledu

In 2008, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada,

our research team[2] embarked on a study of the long-term reintegration of child soldiers in multiple regions of Sierra Leone. Several groups of former child soldiers were part of the study, including a group of 11 participants (seven male and four female) living in Beledu[3], a slum community in Freetown. Beledu is a bustling and densely populated settlement exhibiting numerous socioeconomic activities and includes petty traders, tin-smiths, builders, fruit sellers, tailors, hairdressers and fishermen. It is also a community struggling with massive unemployment; most of these businesses have been created as a result of the lack of formal employment opportunities. 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 possible outbreak and spread of infectious disease. The proximity to the sea is also a major threat to the very existence of the settlement, especially if the sea overflows its banks.

Despite these realities, the community has collectively created important structures to address some of these challenges. For example, the community has several public schools, and a *'non-formal'* education centre supported by an NGO. There is a community health centre that addresses minor ailments. In addition, there is a community group, paid by traders in the market to carry out daily cleaning in the public areas of the community. Tribal chiefs manage local law and order and peaceful coexistence. In situations where individuals fail to comply with the chief's orders, matters are then referred to the police. The community also has a Child Welfare Committee to address child rights and welfare issues. On the whole, the community's members and leaders have been highly proactive in implementing ideas to address local problems.

During an initial study, the research team conducted in-depth interviews in 2008 and 2009 with 11 youth participants in Beledu, exploring their long-term reintegration (see Denov & Buccitelli, 2011). The participants were between the ages of 18 and 23, and had all been associated with an armed group in Sierra Leone during the conflict. The research team were initially introduced to the youth through local social workers who were engaged in community outreach and support in Beledu. All but two of the youth had come to live in Beledu in the post conflict period, primarily in search of anonymity following their association with an armed group. The youth were already known to one another and, given the precariousness of their living situations, worked collaboratively on a daily basis to provide one another with support and protection.

These initial in-depth interviews provided the research team with important knowledge about participants' post conflict lives. Only two of the 11 youth had chosen to maintain contact with surviving family members. Nine of the 11 youth were homeless, and slept in abandoned public showers, or outside on market tables, even during the rainy season. The youth reported that at night, the police frequently arrested and incarcerated them for sleeping outside, enforcing a no loitering policy. While four of the 11 youth had been able to return to school since the end of the war, none reported attending classes regularly due to lack of funds to pay for uniforms, books and tuition. The youth reported facing hunger, poverty, unemployment, and many experienced various forms of violence on a daily basis. All of this occurred alongside

their ongoing struggles to overcome the after effects of the war, including feelings of loss, shame, and guilt due to their wartime affiliations and activities. Yet despite the many challenges they faced, what was also clearly apparent was their immense capacity and strength. Their ability to survive under extremely difficult circumstances was exceptional. The team kept in touch with the youth, and in the months following the interviews, they explored ways to build upon their capacity, eventually considering the possibility of implementing a Photovoice project.

Photovoice was considered with the Beledu youth for a number of important reasons. First, the high level of community commitment to the wellbeing of Beledu's children was well suited to a potential Photovoice initiative. Key community members were advocates for the youth and were anxious to see them involved in pro-social activities. Second, Photovoice had the capacity to serve as a platform from which the youth could develop skills such as photography techniques, team building, cooperation, leadership, and critical thinking skills. Third, the use of photography could facilitate the discussion of sensitive topics (whether community or war related), allowing as much proximity or distance as needed. Fourth, Photovoice could enable participants to establish the project agenda, ensuring greater control over the process. Fifth, through the group discussions inherent to the Photovoice process, youth participants could begin to develop and nurture a sense of collective identity surrounding the project. Finally, Photovoice provided the possibility of eliciting young people's daily lives and reintegration experiences, while simultaneously offering potential opportunities for participation and empowerment.

The process of implementing Photovoice in Beledu: community collaboration, participant training, photo taking and group discussions

Photovoice projects tend to follow a similar process. Participants receive training to become community researchers and ethically conscious photographers. In these new roles, they document, through image, issues of personal and community concern. During the process of photographing, participants collectively discuss and analyse their photographs. In the final stage of the process, participants disseminate their photographs to decision-makers who have the power to effect change. Although most projects have these components in common, researchers have tended to divide the procedures into varying steps, with different objectives and outcomes. Outlined below is a summary of the (nearly) four month process with the Beledu youth and Photovoice.

Community collaboration and consent
By its very nature, Photovoice involves an in-depth examination of community strengths and limitations, exposing issues that may be sensitive or unsettling to residents. Therefore, it was essential at the outset to implement a collaborative process to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of a Photovoice project. To implement this process, the research team organised community discussion meetings with local stakeholders: chiefs, counsellors, youth, teachers, *bras*[4] and *sisis*[5], as well as other residents. The Photovoice project was introduced to the community as a *proposition* rather than a predetermined programme. Discussions surrounding the use of Photovoice were in-depth. Some community members voiced legitimate concerns about the ways in which the photographs were to be used. They noted that many

photojournalists had photographed the community without prior consent, and residents had felt exploited. Some community members hoped that the project could involve more people, including adults living in Beledu, while others fully endorsed the idea. Other community members highlighted the potential involvement of 11 youths who had participated in the aforementioned interviews with the research team in 2008, and 2009. These youth were known within the community both for having faced many challenges during the war, and the ongoing hardships. One community leader felt that these particular youth were in need of guidance and mentorship. After continuing dialogue, the community stakeholders and residents ultimately expressed their approval and support for the project. With the community's consent, the team began to explore the idea in greater depth with the 11 youth participants.

Project objectives and participant training
Introductory meetings were held with the youth to outline the project goals, assess interest, answer any questions, and importantly, explain the process of informed consent. This process was facilitated by the fact that participants already knew members of the research team, and a degree of trust had already been established. Once participants had agreed to participate, further meetings were organised to address expectations and group objectives. Following this, the participants receiving training in photography. Disposable cameras were chosen for the Beledu project to reduce the risks associated with carrying expensive equipment in the community, and to facilitate training with a group who had never before held a camera. Also, disposable cameras were cost effective, as well as simplified photographic printing in a city

only recently transitioning to digital photography. To decrease the risk of targeted violence towards the youth, it was collectively decided that at night, cameras would be kept with the Beledu community counsellor for safekeeping.

Five photographic training sessions were conducted. The training sessions were led by a local photographer, alongside members of the research team. The technical training allowed for participants to grasp the ways in which their creativity could be expressed through a lens. In addition, while ethical practices were discussed at length throughout the course of the project, the training sessions also addressed ethical issues concerning the power and responsibility of a photographer. Discussion questions around ethical practice, drawn from Wang (2006) included:

- What is an acceptable way to approach someone to take his or her picture?
- Should one take pictures of other people without their knowledge?
- How would you feel if someone took your picture without your consent?
- When would you not want to have your picture taken?
- How do you obtain informed consent prior to taking a photograph?

Ethical guidelines were established regarding taking photos in public spaces. Given that participants, and many of those photographed, could not read or write, traditional written consent forms were deemed inappropriate, and verbal consent prior to taking the photo was established as a protocol. Also included in the protocol were an explanation of the project and the purpose of the photographs. Prints of photographs were given to subjects as small tokens for having been photographed.

At the completion of the training, two photography fieldtrips were organised. The photo expeditions were meant to develop technical and creative photography skills, as well as sensitise the youth to ethical practice. The expeditions also gave the research team an opportunity to observe the youths' practices in the field. For example, during the first expedition, few participants engaged in the informed consent protocol that had been established during training. The research team was then able to address this and ensure ethical protocols were followed thereafter.

Photographic themes, photo taking, weekly group discussions and mentors

Taking photos of the Beledu community, including both people and the environment, was the next major phase of the project. To ensure greater focus and clarity during the photography process, the youth collectively came up with themes that would guide and act as a starting point to each weekly photo activity. These included:

- Week 1: My community including my relationship with my *bra* and/or *sisi*
- Week 2: My life as affected by the war
- Week 3: Bad things I did in the past
- Week 4: How the local NGO has changed my life
- Week 5: The life I live now, with both positive and negative aspects

Each participant took approximately 70 to 80 photographs throughout the course of the project. All photos and film were stored in a locked office.

During the photography phase, weekly group meetings were held to enable participants to share and reflect on the meaning and significance of their photographs, their experiences of taking the photos, and share tips and techniques. Given the weekly themes chosen by the youth and their sensitive nature, the meetings also provided a space to express any emerging thoughts or feelings. At each meeting, a round-table *'check-in'* was facilitated where all participants and team members discussed the events of the previous week. While building trust and cohesion, these *'check-ins'* allowed the team to explore and assess the youths' daily challenges and opportunities.

Prior to the weekly meeting, participants were given a printed copy of the photographs taken that week and asked to choose two prints that they felt best represented the weekly theme. Participants were asked to explain to the group the significance of each photograph, while group members were encouraged to comment and ask questions[6]. Following these meetings, written captions were composed that accompanied the photographs. Given the low literacy rates, captions were composed by the youth and written by the research team.

Participants were also offered individual meetings with the research team to assess participants' level of satisfaction with the project, and general wellbeing. Although not mandatory, all participants chose to meet individually. During these meetings, the team was able to take a closer look at participants' photographs and encourage a dialogue concerning the images. Technical advice was given to participants who wanted to improve the aesthetics of their photography. More importantly, individual meetings provided a space where participants could raise concerns that they felt uncomfortable sharing in a group setting. These individual meetings also enabled the research team to assess each participant's unique context, needs, and progress.

To provide additional support to participants, two mentors in their mid-20s (one

female, one male) were hired to accompany the youth through the Photovoice process, and became part of the research team. The mentors, who were themselves former child soldiers and had previously been involved in projects led by the research team, had since become quite successful; one was enrolled in university and the other had started a business. The mentors assisted with project logistics and facilitation, and served as inspiration to the youth by providing motivation, advice, and encouragement. Importantly, the mentors provided a continuous source of support, even after the active phase of the project was completed.

A picture is worth a thousand words: photographic themes from Beledu

The Beledu Photovoice project provided insight into the youth's daily struggles and achievements. The youth's photographs addressed several critical themes: wartime experiences, the Beledu community, economic survival and livelihoods, social connections, and education. These themes, all related to long-term reintegration, are addressed further below. The appearances of those in captured in the photographs have been blurred to ensure anonymity.

Wartime experiences

Despite the passing of time, wartime memories remained vivid. The photographs demonstrated the fragility and pain that continued many years after the end of the war. Participants took photos that were meant to re-enact their wartime experiences in the bush (Figure 1).

Another female participant addressed her wartime experiences (Figure 2).

Other participants chose to explore issues of post war guilt and shame. One participant

Figure 1: 'This picture represents the war. I was captured during the war and taken by the rebels to a village called Mambolo. I later escaped and hid in the bushes for one week. I tried to find my way to Freetown and, once I got there, I had to sleep outside on a table in the market. To survive, I started carrying loads for people, including one woman who later helped me and took me into her house. This woman became my sisi' (Male participant).

Figure 2: 'This picture portrays things that happened to me during the war. When the rebels came, they asked for all the valuables in the house. Unfortunately, my family had no valuables and did not have money either. The rebels took me out, raped me and beat me at the same time. I decided to show this picture because, when I think about this time, I feel sad' (Female participant).

depicted an image of himself hiding in the bush during the war (Figure 3).

The Beledu community

Through their photographs, the youth addressed Beledu's physical environment and concerns about health and safety (Figure 4).

The challenge of homelessness featured prominently in the photographs. Homelessness greatly undermined their efforts to progress in life, and kept them constantly exposed to criminality, health problems, and a lack of privacy. In addition, lack of shelter affected their educational goals. As participants explained to the team, shelter is necessary to ensure that school materials, including

Figure 4: 'This area is situated in Beledu. Children 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. I have decided to take this picture for the world to see that our community is not healthy and help change the situation' (Female participant).

books and uniforms, are kept in a secure place. A stable and secure home enables students to read class notes and sleep properly for the subsequent school day. At the final exhibition, four participants chose to display photographs of the public showers, where many of the youth were forced to sleep (Figure 5).

Other participants chose to highlight the violence in the community. As this participant's caption explained (photograph has been removed to ensure confidentiality):

'This picture says a lot about what happens in our community. It shows some gang members. This fighting sometimes involves stabbings, which the government is totally against. This happens often when we have football games. There are times when we have shows and rival groups will attack us and steal our things. Even the police are sometimes afraid to come to our aid (. . .) I want people to see this and ask them to incite the government to ban these gangs because I am tired of them' (Male participant).

Figure 3: 'During the war, a lot of us suffered. This is the way our brothers use to hide when fighting the civil war in the country. Civilians suffered innocently because the rebels did not attack the people and groups that were initially targeted. They got to the wrong people. Many innocent people were killed' (Male participant).

Figure 5: *'This picture shows the showers in [Beledu], where I used to sleep. Unfortunately, they drove me out because they need to repair the building. I have to stay with friends now . . . One day, they threw my personal belongings outside and I was too ashamed to go and collect them during the daylight. I had to go at night because I was ashamed' (Female participant).*

Despite the apparent problems in Beledu, participants also chose to highlight positive aspects of their community, such as the football field (Figure 6).

Through their photographs, participants exposed the complex issues, both positive and negative, that exist in their community. Most pictures, however, demonstrated the multitude of community problems that

Figure 6: *'This is the football field in my community. One day, I was sitting down and I had the urge to go and train on the field. Because of this, I found I had a talent at football. I started partaking in football competitions and I now can earn something from that. Football has become a source of income for me' (Male participant).*

affect not only the youth, but also many residents of different ages, gender, social status and abilities.

Economic survival and livelihoods

One theme that cut across most other photographic themes was economic survival. During the many group discussions, the youth reported that they settled in Beledu after the war in part because of key economic activities that transpired in the community, such as the busy market where they could find odd jobs. However, they had experienced profound difficulties in obtaining long-term, sustainable livelihoods. The photographs taken demonstrated the various ways, both legal and illegal, the youth sustained themselves, including stealing, gambling, carrying loads of heavy goods, domestic work, and sex work (Figure 7). Female participants depicted their economic survival (Figures 8 and 9).

Another young woman's caption addressed her involvement in sex work as a means of survival (photograph removed to ensure confidentiality).

> *'When I came to Freetown after the war, I used to go out with my friends to the clubs to find money. We would meet guys and they would pick us up to go to their houses. I did not feel good about doing this. I was doing it to survive. I decided to leave this lifestyle by helping people with their domestic work. Some even give me goods to sell for them at the market. That is how I am surviving now' (Female participant).*

The effort required to assure one's survival in Beledu is monumental, and the images and captions illustrated the youth's constant struggle for basic needs. Participants were earning, on average, 3,000 Leones per day (less than $1 USD). The structural realities

Figure 7: 'This picture says something about my past life. I used to gamble and play coco⁷. When I wanted to play it and did not have money, I had to steal. I used to carry loads for people and would steal the load and sell the merchandise. This was my only means of survival and I had no one to advise me that this was not good' (Male participant).

Figure 9: 'From this picture, you can see that I am straining to find my living. I try to sell cucumbers, plums and mangos to sustain myself. From the little profit I get, I use that money to pay my school fees and buy my school materials' (Female participant).

of Sierra Leone's poor economy, lack of infrastructure, and profound inequalities have created a context whereby youth, who are unable to progress via education or employment, face ongoing marginalisation and exclusion.

Figure 8: 'This is my sisi's kitchen; I help her with her domestic work. I help sell her cooked food, fetch water and do her laundry. I went to her because she was alone and she had no one to help her. My own boyfriend was not treating me well so I had to find a solution. I decided to take this picture because it is my source of survival' (Female participant).

Social connections and systems of support
The importance of social connections in the community featured prominently in photographs. In fact, all participants took photographs of people in Beledu that they felt close to and admired. These affiliations reportedly provided inspiration and motivation for the participants. One participant addressed his relationship with his *bra* (Figure 10).
Others related similar feelings about community role models (Figure 11).
Others participants took photographs that evoked great sorrow and were often related to their lack of support systems, and the loss of loved ones during the war (Figure 12).
In another picture, this same participant described the impact her mother's death had on her life (Figure 13).

Figure 10: 'I am inspired by my bra [. . .]. Because of his education, the community involves him in all the work they do. He is the brain behind everything in the community. I would like to be like him in the future. I want to thank [him] for his advice and support [. . .] because he helped me reorganise my life and my future' (Male participant).

According to the youth, lack of strong social ties and systems of support in Beledu rendered them more vulnerable to poverty, marginalisation and violence. In response,

Figure 11: 'I want to be like the man in this picture, whose name is [. . .]. He is an educated man, he spends time with his books and I have never seen him sitting around idle. His house is filled with books, and I also like books a lot. I want books around me because I have a lot of determination. He is always encouraging kids and trying to help them. I want people to help me to be like him. I see him as a role model and I want to be even more educated than he is' (Male participant).

Figure 12: 'This picture reminds me of my mother. This is the school uniform for the school I was attending when my mother was alive. My mother was a very caring person, she gave me food and I was so happy with her around. After my mother's death, my elder brother started paying my school fees but stopped when he got married' (Female participant).

the youth reported seeking out *bras*, *sisis* and gangs that sometimes provided protection, food, advocated on their behalf. They also stood in the place of their parents when they were in conflict with the law (Denov & Buccitelli, 2011).

Education

All Photovoice participants emphasised their desire to continue their education and described education as a pathway to economic and social advancement. Through their photographs and captions, it became evident that education constituted a collective value they all shared, but was largely inaccessible (Figures 14 and 15).

Figure 13: 'This picture makes me think of children who lose their parents. They end up being slaves in the homes of their guardians. I remember when I lost my mother; I had to work very hard for the people I was staying with. I had to do the laundry, fetch water for them, cut their leaves and vegetables, wash their dishes and sweep. Right now, I only cut leaves for people that pay me. I am not forced to do it anymore' (Female participant).

Regardless of the particular theme addressed, participants' photographs and captions appeared to have an established purpose; they identified personal and community problems, relayed hopes and

Figure 14: 'I took this picture because 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 and that of my family' (Female participant).

Figure 15: 'This picture represents what I want to be. This is the first year I am able to go back to school. I really wanted to go back so I decided to buy some sweets and chocolates and sell them to pay for part of my [school] fees... I feel good about this because I no longer get punished and beaten like when I used to steal. This upcoming year, I do not have money to pay my fees and I don't know if I will be able to continue. I want to be someone good in the future so I can help other people' (Male participant).

dreams, and appealed for social change. Importantly, their photos are highly dialogical in nature, often inciting a (re) action in the viewer ('*I want people to see this and ask them to incite the government...*'). At the same time, the viewer is often being asked to bear witness to their lives, whether past or present ('*...you see that I am straining...*'). The dialogical nature of their photographs and captions, speaks to the power and voice that the method conferred, and what the participants chose to do with that voice.

Dissemination: three Photovoice exhibitions

Two separate exhibitions of the youth's work were held in Freetown, with the youth choosing the photographs that went on display. The first exhibition was held in the Beledu community in August 2010. In January 2011, a second exhibition was held that targeted policymakers, including representatives from government, local and international NGOs, and local media. Youth participants were in attendance at both events. In March 2011, the photographs were presented at McGill University in Canada, where members of the Sierra Leonean community attended, alongside faculty, students and the general public. Unfortunately, participants were unable to attend the Canadian exhibition as a result of travel visa restrictions. However, with participants' consent, high resolution copies of their photographs were auctioned off to help raise funds for their school fees and further skills training.

At the two exhibitions in Sierra Leone, in addition to exhibiting the photographs and captions, participants were offered an opportunity to speak, as well as perform theatre and music. All participants played an active role in the Freetown exhibitions, discussing their photos and highlighting their concerns about community issues. At the suggestion of participants, speeches were organised chronologically, where they discussed their past, their present lives in Beledu, and their hopes for the future. The impact of their speeches was significant; hearing the youth's personal challenges and collective struggles had a powerful effect on the audience, which was voiced during feedback to the youth.

Discussion and lessons learned

Outlined below are the lessons learned from the project, and an assessment of Photovoice as a methodology to be used with war affected youth.

Strengths

Photovoice was successful in helping to identify key issues of concern to the youth in Beledu. The photos also provided great insight into their daily lives, both past and present. The research team was therefore, able to garner the in-depth realities of their community, as well as the challenges and opportunities of long-term reintegration.

Prior to the project, the youth reported not being engaged in many social activities and were eager to do so. The near perfect attendance of youth participants at all meetings, even during the rainy season (where travel was difficult and where they may have had little or no sleep), was a testament to their motivation. The Photovoice project therefore, appeared to help combat the boredom and inactivity that the youth had identified as a problem.

Photovoice also provided a medium where difficult discussions could take place. During the project, the youth demonstrated great courage by exposing wartime experiences of victimisation and perpetration, unlawful activities, and the realities of poverty and homelessness, all of which continued to foster feelings of shame and guilt. Sensitive issues appeared to be easier to address through the lens of a camera, and was voiced as such during group meetings.

In a debriefing session at the end of the project, all participants reported that the project fostered a gradual change in community members' perception of them. They reported that residents began referring to them as *'professional photographers'*, which instilled pride and confidence. Other participants noted that prior to the project, they did not have *'good reputations'* in the community, and that the Photovoice process helped to show

sceptical community members that the participants were capable of much more than they had previously thought.

The mentorship component was a significant strength of the project. Participants gained access to positive role models with whom they could converse, seek advice and find support. For the mentors themselves, the project also provided leadership skills and propelled them into positions of facilitators, leaders, and guides.

The Photovoice process provided the team with much greater contextual information regarding life and long-term reintegration in Beledu, than in-depth interviews alone. The weekly discussions made it possible to observe participants' interactions, as well as group dynamics. The team was able to ascertain the group's key leaders, allegiances, and points of tension, as well as directly observe the strains of living in Beledu. The daily struggles to eat, sleep, manage violence and uncertainty, became a highly visible part of the Photovoice process. The Photovoice process and extended timeframe also appeared to facilitate greater participant trust and rapport. The initial interview sessions were limited in their ability to develop meaningful relationships with participants. After working with the youth on Photovoice for nearly 4 months, they began to confide in the research team regarding personal and group problems. In such instances, the research team explored options with the youth, and in many cases, involved members of the community to advocate and mediate on the youth's behalf.

Challenges
The team faced a number of challenges during the process, particularly in relation to logistics and implementation. The project's timeline coincided with the rainy season and with the holy month of Ramadan. Transportation and punctuality became more difficult, as did the exhibition preparation and execution.

Other challenges related directly to the participant's living conditions. Many participants would arrive sleep deprived, or without having eaten anything all day. Many were dealing with very difficult living arrangements and life events. This situation inevitably had an impact on participants' concentration and attention span. The team tried to respond to this by providing a full meal at every group meeting, a transport stipend, and a supportive ear whenever needed.

Living conditions in Beledu also posed problems for participants during the photo taking. Having a disposable camera in Beledu brought both positive and negative attention. Despite arrangements being made for the nightly safekeeping of cameras, some participants reported their cameras being stolen or '*borrowed*'. In some cases, the camera would return to the participant with the film already completely used.

The social action component of the Photovoice methodology, where participants aim to engage decision makers in a dialogue concerning social change, was also challenging. Discussions during the photo exhibitions were extensive. Policy makers, who attended the exhibitions, articulated that they were touched by the photographs, commented on deplorable participants' living conditions, and voiced their outrage about the lack of educational and employment opportunities. However, these discussions ultimately failed to yield concrete changes for the youth. This left the participants and research team with concerns about the feasibility of Photovoice as a truly viable tool for social change. A clearer follow-up strategy was needed in terms of community advocacy and change,

which is not normally addressed within the Photovoice literature.

Coming to terms with the project's conclusion was another important challenge. Photovoice is normally only intended to last 4–6 weeks, with a clear beginning and a clear end. However, despite our project lasting much longer, many of the youth reported experiencing a void following the exhibitions. The research team noted a similar feeling, and were left asking: *'what's next'*? This feeling was exacerbated by the limited results that occurred in terms of producing a clear plan of action for social change in Beledu. At the project's conclusion, the team felt that the process had only just begun, and more needed to happen with this particular group of young people. In response, the team began to conceptualise a youth driven and youth led project that would be self-sustaining, this is currently underway with the youth in Beledu.

Recommendations

Given the above challenges, the team concluded with a set of recommendations in relation to using the Photovoice method with war affected youth:

1. Create a plan for social action that is specific and realistic at the outset. For Beledu, prior to beginning the project, the team did not determine precisely with whom to address participants' concerns. In addition, terms such as *'government officials'* or *'decision makers'* were used without clearly identifying whom these terms referred to, and involving them from the start.

2. Involve qualified local personnel in the project and include social workers. The team found social workers particularly helpful in planning and logistics, as well as being skilled at addressing the individual, group and community dynamics inherent to the process.

3. Involve diverse community members at the onset of the project. Facilitate a process (of decision making, communication, logistics) that involves different individuals in the community, in order to truly reflect the community based nature of Photovoice.

4. Facilitate a shift in paradigm, and ensure the participants speak for themselves, in their words, at every occasion possible. Allow them to begin a process of advocacy for themselves and their community.

5. Allocate five to six months for the process. The Beledu project took place over the course of nearly four months, which seemed insufficient. The team and participants often felt rushed, particularly during the final stage of the project.

6. Emphasise team building activities throughout the course of the project. In this project, it helped to enhance group cohesion, and social and community connections.

7. Include group activities that allow for physical movement, such as the photo expeditions. The Photovoice *'in-class'* training sessions and group discussions may feel restrictive to some youth. Develop ways to integrate action oriented components to the process.

8. Consider including mentors. Not normally included in traditional Photovoice processes, the mentors for this project were highly beneficial, and became instrumental to the overall functioning and success of the project.

9. Plan an appropriate termination to the project. Project completion may prove to be challenging for participants, particularly if their opinion is rarely solicited for research or policy-oriented

programmes, as was the case for the Beledu youth.

10. Facilitate a thorough debriefing period for participants, staff, and mentors. Discuss the idea of a follow-up process, or self-sustaining group activity, that could help fill the potential void felt at the end of the project.

Despite the many limitations, an array of meaningful information, experiences and areas of future social action became apparent through the Photovoice process that had not otherwise been accessible through in-depth interviews. Photovoice ultimately helped to engage participants, and enabled a deeper understanding of the lives of a highly marginalised, and largely invisible, group of war affected youth.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Reflecting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as *'every human being below eighteen years'* (Article 1).

[2] The research team was made up of researchers from McGill University and local Sierra Leonean social workers.

[3] The name of the community has been altered to ensure anonymity.

[4] In Krio, *'bra'* refers to an informal relationship between a male adult and a youth. The *'bra'* is normally older, and more financially secure than the youth. In Beledu, a *'bra'* often provides protection to the youth and, in turn, the youth is required to work for them.

[5] In Beledu, a *'Sisi'* refers to an adult woman who cares for children who are not biologically related. Children often perform domestic tasks, such as cooking, laundering or caring heavy loads for the *sisi*, in exchange for food and shelter.

[6] Discussions concerning the photographs followed an adapted version of the SHOWeD model (Wang, 1999).

[7] *'Coco'* is an illegal gambling game involving stones and wagers.

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