

The Sierra Leonean Youth: Hope is the currency of the Future

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the concept of hope as a foundational element of human aspiration, framing it as the "currency of the future" for Sierra Leonean youth. Drawing on the philosophical traditions of Gabriel Marcel, Ernst Bloch, and African communal thought, it interrogates the interplay between "youth-ness," agency, and societal transformation within the context of Sierra Leone's post-conflict reality. The analysis juxtaposes the empowering potential of hope with its limitations when detached from structural and institutional support. By exploring the intersections of existential freedom, collective responsibility, and temporal orientation, the paper reveals how hope can serve as both a mechanism for resilience and a tool of pacification. Through a nuanced critique of current policies and the saviour mentality perpetuated by external interventions, the paper calls for actionable frameworks that anchor hope in agency and communal progress, positioning youth as active architects of Sierra Leone's future.

Keywords: Hope, Youth-ness, Sierra Leone, Agency, Empowerment, Policy Development, Resilience.

"Hope is a weaker form of confidence." - Rene Descartes.

Introduction

This paper explores the notion of hope as the 'currency of the future' for Sierra Leonean youth. It argues that while hope plays a critical role in shaping the aspirations and agency of young people in Sierra Leone, it must be understood within the broader socio-political and historical context of the country. The paper examines how 'youth-ness' is conceptualized both philosophically and culturally in Sierra Leone, and how this intersects with the concept of hope. By critically assessing current youth policies and their impact, this paper seeks to propose a nuanced understanding of the potential and limitations of hope as a driving force for youth empowerment in Sierra Leone.

The concept of youth occupies a significant place in philosophical discourse, given its implications for the future of societies and its embodiment of potentiality and change. In the context of Sierra Leone, a nation grappling with the legacies of civil war, economic instability, and political challenges, the youth population represents both the promise of renewal and the reservoir of hope necessary for transformative progress. This paper explores the philosophical dimensions of "youth-ness" in Sierra Leone, focusing on the proposition that hope serves as the currency of the future for the nation's youth. Through a nuanced analysis of the intersections between hope, youth, and societal development, this paper aims to articulate a vision of youth-ness that is both philosophically robust and contextually grounded.

While Sierra Leone's youth look to "hope without", a hope from outside them and their nation to solve their social, economic and political problems, their current challenges do not offer them the confidence to think of a "hope within"; hope within them or within the country to bring them to the future they want.

Hope as a currency to the future is an illusion; it is a theatre of changing rules and not substance. A real semblance where things change on the surface but not underneath. The top of the issues get hot, even sizzling, but very cold at the bottom, making deep, long term change difficult to manifest.

Conceptualizing Youth-ness

Youth-ness, a term that captures the essence of being young, is a complex and multifaceted concept. In this paper, youth-ness is explored through both Western philosophical perspectives and the specific cultural context of Sierra Leone. Aristotle's notion of potentiality, Sartre's concept of existential freedom, and Heidegger's idea of 'being-toward-death' provide a theoretical framework to understand youth-ness as a period of potential and possibility. However, in the context of Sierra Leone, youth-ness also carries specific socio-cultural meanings, shaped by historical events such as the civil war and ongoing economic challenges. For example, Munyaradzi Mawere emphasises that African youth face unique challenges and prospects shaped by their societal context, linking youth potential to the broader development agenda. This section argues that youth-ness in Sierra Leone cannot be fully understood without considering these cultural and historical factors.

This is not to define youth but rather the concept of "Youth-ness";

it is a state of “being” to be put simply. Youth-ness can be understood as a state of being that transcends mere biological age (defining youth), encompassing a dynamic interplay of identity, potentiality, and temporality. Youth-ness is often associated with notions of becoming, growth, and transformation. Aristotle's teleological framework, for instance, views youth as a stage of development directed towards the actualisation of one's potential¹. Similarly, existentialist thinkers like Sartre and Heidegger emphasise the forward-looking aspect of youth, which posits a future realm of possibilities that shape present actions and choices^{2, 3}.

In Sierra Leone, youth-ness is particularly significant given the country's demographic structure: approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 35⁴. This demographic reality positions the youth not only as beneficiaries of developmental policies but as active agents in the creation of the nation's future. Therefore, understanding youth-ness in Sierra Leone requires an engagement with both philosophical theories of potentiality and the specific socio-political context of the country.

In essence, youth-ness in Sierra Leone encompasses more than mere biological age—it reflects a dynamic interplay of identity, potentiality, and temporality. Mawere argues that African philosophical traditions often frame youth-ness as a communal phase, where individuals acquire knowledge through mentorship and prepare for future leadership roles. This differs from Western individualistic notions and aligns more with the collective experiences outlined in *African Youth in Contemporary Society*.

¹ See Kraut, R. 2022. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman Fall. Accessed August 2024.

² Sartre, Jean-Paul, “*Existentialism is a Humanism*”. Edited by John Kulka. Yale University Press (2007), 23, 36

³ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell (1962). Heidegger's view of temporality suggests that the essence of human existence is rooted in projecting oneself into future possibilities. For youth, this projection might be particularly vivid, as it represents a stage of life filled with potential and decision-making that shapes one's destiny.

⁴ The youth policy of Sierra Leone and all the West African region (ECOWAS) defines youth as people in the age bracket 15-35 year. Other definitions such as the United Nations 15-29 years and EU set its cut-off at 25 years. Given the circumstances of the West African region (coups, wars, and other instabilities), I believe 15 to 29 years is a reasonable categorisation for youth; with 25-29 being further categorised as young adults.

Additionally, “youth-ness” involves responsibilities tied to cultural roles and expectations. In agricultural contexts, youth are seen as vital contributors to communal food security, learning farming techniques through generational mentorship⁵. This highlights the contrast between communal versus individualistic learning processes found in African and Western philosophies respectively.

Youth-ness As A Non-Biological Or Age Metric

From a philosophical perspective, defining "youth" and "youth-ness" across sectors like agriculture, business, and health requires examining how each field frames youth in terms of its expectations, responsibilities, and values, as well as the role of youth in society. This definition can vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and sectoral contexts. Below is a breakdown of these ideas, integrating insights from various sources, including philosophical and anthropological reflections on the concept of youth.

Agriculture:

In many traditional societies, youth in agriculture represents a phase of physical vigour, essential for labour-intensive work. The concept of "youth-ness" in agriculture is often tied to the capacity for hard, physical labour, resilience, and innovation in farming techniques. The philosophical dimension comes from how rural societies emphasize the transition from youthful dependence to adult autonomy, where youth are trained in agriculture as part of a communal responsibility. Philosophically, African traditions highlight communal knowledge transmission, where agricultural expertise is shared across generations. Youth in agriculture thus represents both physical vitality and the ability to bear the communal weight of food production and survival.

Agricultural Youth in Philosophy:

This understanding is grounded in African communal traditions, where the youth are seen as apprentices under the guidance of elders, slowly acquiring the knowledge to sustain the community. Unlike Western individualism, where success might be personal, agricultural youth

⁵ Richards, Paul. *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: The International African Institute and James Currey, 1996. Richards in his work highlights some of these concepts of framing “youth-ness”, focusing on the impact of state decline on youth and how they are drawn into insurgencies. The issue of “mentorship” is exhibited in the how they are drawn into insurgencies – the grooming and the preparing.

in many African societies signifies a communal role, as demonstrated in collective farming practices.

Business:

In business, "youth-ness" often signifies innovation, energy, and adaptability. Young people are seen as key drivers of economic growth through entrepreneurship and risk-taking. Philosophically, youth in business represents a phase of dynamic potential, where individuals can challenge the status quo and bring in fresh perspectives. Here, youth is not just about age but about mindset—a readiness to embrace change and new technologies, particularly in the era of digital transformation.

Philosophical Lens in Business:

From a broader philosophical view, youth in business reflects ideas from existentialism and pragmatism, where identity and success are shaped by actions and decisions. Business youth are often seen as agents of change, possessing a fluid identity shaped by the rapid pace of technology and market shifts. The youth are the metaphorical embodiment of Nietzschean "will power," striving to transform their environment⁶.

Health:

In the health sector, youth is typically framed around physical development, resilience, and peak biological function. However, philosophical discussions around health and youth also encompass the ethical dimensions of care, responsibility, and access to healthcare. Youth in health is often seen through the lens of potential—both in terms of physical capabilities and the long-term health outcomes of early intervention.

Youth and Health in Philosophy:

The conceptualization of youth in health can be linked to bioethics, where youth is seen as a critical period for developing lifelong habits. Philosophically, this involves debates around bodily autonomy, access to healthcare, and societal obligations to provide for the well-being of the young. African traditions, for example, consider health as a communal affair, with elders guiding youth on health practices. In contrast, Western models often emphasize individual responsibility, highlighting a binary that Prof. Gibril Sesay⁷ discusses when contrasting Western individuation with African communal values by the African cultural-

⁶ Ansah, Afia A., *“Youth Development and Empowerment in Africa: Policy and Practice”*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

⁷ Tsike-Sossah, Simon. Field notes: conversations with Prof Gibril Sesay during data collection exercise. (April 15, 2024)

socialist Julius in his seminal work, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*.

Other Sectors (Education, Politics):

In education, youth is tied to learning and growth, a period for acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for future roles in society. Politically, youth are often seen as both the future of the nation and a vulnerable group requiring policies for inclusion and protection.

Philosophical Context in Education and Politics:

Philosophically, education in youth is linked to both Plato's theory of development (where youth is a time to shape the soul) and contemporary human rights discourses that focus on the right to education and political participation. Politically, youth represents both promise and challenge—a group that can either stabilise or disrupt societal norms depending on how they are included in decision-making. African youth are sometimes perceived through the lens of "intergenerational responsibility," where elders guide them into leadership roles gradually.

Hope: A Futures Medicine

Philosophers like Ernst Bloch and Gabriel Marcel emphasise that hope is essential for human flourishing. This transformative view of hope extends to African youth, who, as Mawere⁸ argues, are key agents of social change. In sectors like business and health, youth are positioned as bearers of innovative ideas, often navigating between traditional roles and modern expectations. Mawere points out that hope in African societies is not merely individualistic but deeply intertwined with collective welfare and future aspirations.⁹

In agriculture, for example, hope manifests through resilience and innovation as young people adapt to changing environmental conditions while sustaining their communities. Similarly, in business, hope drives entrepreneurial youth to challenge the status quo, as Richards discusses in his analysis of post-conflict Sierra Leone, where youth are crucial to rebuilding the economy through new ventures¹⁰. Bloch's theory of hope, as an active engagement with possibility, resonates here by highlighting youth-ness as a period where transformative actions can shape societal progress¹¹.

⁸ Mawere, Munyaradzi. *African Youth in Contemporary Society: Challenges, Prospects, and Potentials*. Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2017, 484-486.

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ See Richards work on *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone*. (1996)

¹¹ Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*. MIT Press

Transformative actions and concept of Hope as medicine is that it is not to cure the problems of today *for* today, but *for* the future. Hope waits on action, usually an action of the tomorrow; of future... Hope allows you to take on the pain of the present in anticipation that there will be less pain tomorrow. While Bloch breaths and emphasises a positive hope, its use in everyday lives of young people is to placate them (the youth) that they have other opportunities or that their time has not yet arrived. Hope is used to drive young people to be patient and await their illusive turn.

Gabriel Marcel states, “[t]he person who hopes does not accept the current situation as final; however, neither does she imagine or anticipate the circumstance that would deliver her from her plight, rather she merely hopes for deliverance.”¹² This emphasises Descartes view that “Hope is a weaker form of confidence”, it gives you the courage to anticipate facing the future but not the present. Together, Descartes and Marcel put youth in a state where they are hopeless not for lack of Being¹³, forward looking or as Bloch said, “better future”. This is the case of the Sierra Leonean youth; their hope is based on being hopeless AND powerless. When you are “with power” hope is a tool for progression and without power, it is hopelessness; an inability to dig oneself from their abys of nothingness.

Martha Nussbaum¹⁴ posits that Politicians and policy makers work to ease tension and calm things by giving Hope. This is the best hand they can play, she says, while further arguing that fear sinks, while hope expands and uplifts, hence its illusive capacity¹⁵.

In African philosophical tradition (as with all things), hope is often intertwined with communal values and the collective pursuit of well-being. For instance, the concept of “Ubuntu” underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and the shared responsibility for mutual flourishing¹⁶. In this sense, hope, in the African context is both a personal and communal endeavour oriented towards the betterment of society as a whole. However, in

¹² Treanor, Brian, and Brendan Sweetman. ‘Gabriel (-Honoré) Marcel.’ Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Accessed August 18, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/marcel/>.

¹³ Their essences taken from them – unemployment, rights, and opportunities

¹⁴ Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*. (Oxford University Press, 2018) 13.

¹⁵ My interpretation and conclusion.

¹⁶ Mbiti, John S. 1990. *African Religions & Philosophy*. United Kingdom: Pearson Education.

conversations with Sierra Leonean youth, the concept of hope is for an outsider, a saviour who will come from without to save Sierra Leone. The saviour concept is deeply rooted in military interventions of the military wing of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), ECO-MOG (Economic Community of West Africa States Monitoring Group) and the British Special Forces. Now, the saviour mentality has shifted from military to “development partners and aid agencies”¹⁷.

The Sierra Leonean Context

As Mawere and Richards both observe, Sierra Leone’s youth face distinct challenges shaped by the country’s history of civil conflict and political instability. Mawere argues that African youth, while burdened by these historical realities, hold immense potential for societal transformation. This aligns with Walter Rodney’s seminal critique of the role of external forces in under-developing African societies, particularly with respect to agriculture and (youth) labour¹⁸.

Sierra Leone’s history of civil conflict, economic challenges, and political instability has profoundly shaped the lived experiences of its youth. The civil war (1991-2002), according to Richards, left a deep scar on the nation, with many young people either directly involved in the conflict or severely affected by its aftermath. The post-war period has been characterized by efforts towards reconstruction, reconciliation, and development, yet significant challenges remain, including high unemployment rates, limited educational opportunities, and political marginalisation of the youth¹⁹.

In this context, hope emerges as a critical resource for the Sierra Leonean youth. It is the driving force that sustains their aspirations and motivates their engagement in societal transformation. However, hope is not an abstract ideal; it must be nurtured and supported through concrete policies and practices that address the structural barriers faced by the youth.

¹⁷ In 2023 elections and the electoral reforms negotiations call on “development” partners to re-run the elections and called on the formation of a “stabilization force” from ECOWAS.

¹⁸ Rodney, Walter. 1974. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.

¹⁹ World Bank. 'Sierra Leone Youth Employment.' Accessed 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/400641619674751559/pdf/Post-Review-Youth-Employment-Policy-Brief.pdf>

Youth-ness and Hope: Intersections and Implications

The intersection of youth-ness and hope is complex and multifaceted. This section explores several key areas where these concepts intersect: Temporal Orientation, Agency and Empowerment, and Social Capital. Temporal Orientation examines how Sierra Leonean youth perceive their futures, often balancing hope for progress with the realities of their socio-economic environment. Agency and Empowerment considers how hope can either enhance or diminish young people's sense of control over their lives. In a context where economic opportunities are scarce, the empowerment discourse can sometimes reduce to a simplistic equation of financial independence with empowerment. Finally, Social Capital explores how the networks and relationships that youth build are influenced by their hopes and aspirations, and how these in turn affect their ability to navigate societal structures. This section also critically examines gender dynamics, exploring how the experiences of young women in Sierra Leone differ from those of young men.

The relationship between youth-ness and hope in Sierra Leone can be conceptualized through several key intersections:

Temporal Orientation:

Youth-ness is inherently future-oriented, embodying a sense of becoming and potentiality. Hope reinforces this orientation by providing a framework within which young people can envision and work towards a better future. This temporal alignment between youth-ness and hope underscores the importance of forward-looking policies that prioritize long-term development over short-term gains.

Agency and Empowerment:

Hope empowers young people by affirming their capacity to effect change. In a society where structural barriers often impede the aspirations of the youth, fostering a sense of hope can enhance their agency and participation in socio-political processes. Empowerment through hope thus becomes a critical strategy for harnessing the potential of Sierra Leone's youth.

However, in Sierra Leone, the concept of agency is placed in the bosom of patriarchy or facilitated by it. Men are in charge of everything, especially old men; women are left out and young men and women have limited opportunities to be part of the processes that "empowerment" bestows on them.

Post-war, one of the most funded projects in Sierra Leone is human

rights and advocacy programmes. However, as an active participant in this dialogue, “empowerment” has been reduced to money and not the higher concept of fairness, justice, equity, equality and all those higher level issues that the concept of “empowerment” encapsulates.

Tsike-Sossah²⁰ makes the case for the ideal partnership between youth and adults being the continuous *Youth-Adult Engagement Approach*. He argues that “[h]owever, to produce or reach “full participation” is a product of symbiotic relationship between active and supportive adults and active youth (this relationship is marked by the double arrows – see figure 1 below). Active youth are young people working to improve themselves to become politically active, by seeking the support of adults and or are willing to work with adults. It is the thinking of the writer that this relationship if nurtured will lead to an “Effective youth Political Participation and Development” which in itself will promote (an) “active youth” and “Active and Supportive Adults”.”

He shows this with the figure 1 below:

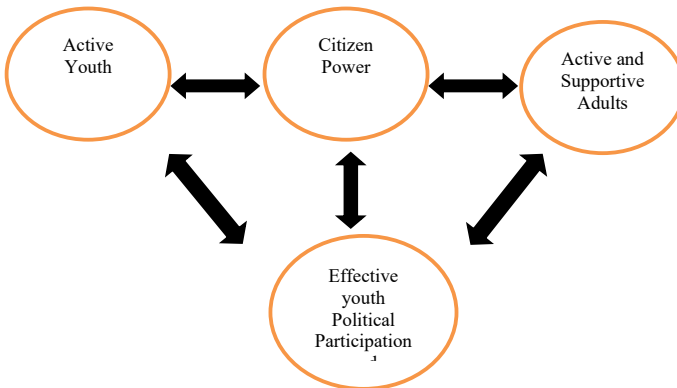


Figure 1: Continuous Youth-Adult Engagement Approach.
Adopted from Tsike-Sossah (2012).

PJ - (not full name), a Key Informant Interviewee (KII), makes references that this form of engagement does not exist and entrances to par-

²⁰ Tsike-Sossah, Simon Eyram. *Youth and Local Governance: Bringing Youth to Decision Making in Sierra Leone*. Hamburg, Germany: (LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing. 2012) n.p

icipation and exhibiting youth-ness are limited. In a focus group discussion at the University of Sierra Leone, first year students in Social work unanimously stated they prefer living in their current situation as dead people than standing up to power and dying. If this is not a state of hopelessness and powerlessness, then it is hard to find any other frames.

Resilience and Adaptation

The challenges faced by the Sierra Leonean youth necessitate a resilient and adaptive mindset. Hope, as an active engagement with possibilities, cultivates resilience by encouraging young people to persevere in the face of adversity. This resilience is essential for navigating the uncertainties and complexities of the post-conflict environment.

Sierra Leone has faced difficult times during the 11 year war, and 21 years post war, she had faced economic difficulties, Ebola, mudslides and together with the rest of the world faced COVID. Resilience and adaptation is not new to her; however, Sierra Leone has been resilient and adaptive to the point where she has become sanitised, and the words *resilience and adaptation* have long lost its meaning. Resilience and adaptation only mean “anyway to keep living” and translates into innovation that does not solve community problems but rather personal ones. It has led to increased corruption and grand theft, extortion, increased criminality and drug use (to dull the effects of helplessness and powerlessness).

Collective Responsibility

The communal dimension of hope in the African context emphasizes the shared responsibility for nurturing the well-being of the youth. This collective approach aligns with the principles of Ubuntu and highlights the role of community, family, and societal institutions in supporting the aspirations of young people. Policies that foster community engagement and support systems are thus integral to sustaining hope among the youth.

Since the last presidential election of 2023, the political landscape has become deeply divided and volatile. The ubuntu ideals of community and oneness is diminishing fast, the nuclear and individual is on the rise, raising insecurity, poverty and other social and governance ills. The government is struggling to hold the country with 3 attempted coups in the last 4 years. Building a Sierra Leone for all is becoming an illusion.

Policy Implications

Given the challenges and opportunities identified, it is crucial to develop policies that are both effective and contextually relevant. This section offers specific recommendations for policy reforms that could better address the needs of Sierra Leonean youth. For instance, in the area of education, there is a need for curriculum reform that focuses not only on academic knowledge but also on practical skills that align with the job market. In terms of employment, policies should encourage entrepreneurship through access to credit and business training, while also creating more formal employment opportunities. The feasibility of these recommendations we discuss, acknowledging potential challenges such as limited resources and political instability. However, the paper argues that with careful planning and commitment, these challenges can be overcome.

Translating the philosophical insights on youth-ness and hope into practical policy measures involves a multi-faceted approach:

1. **Education and Skills Development:** Access to quality education and vocational training is crucial for equipping the youth with the skills necessary for meaningful participation in the economy and society. Investment in education not only enhances individual potential but also fosters a collective sense of hope and possibility.

2. **Economic Opportunities:** Addressing youth unemployment through targeted economic policies, such as entrepreneurship programs and youth-friendly business environments, can create pathways for economic empowerment. Providing young people with opportunities to contribute to and benefit from economic growth is essential for sustaining hope.

3. **Political Inclusion:** Ensuring the political representation and participation of young people in decision-making processes is vital for fostering a sense of ownership and agency. Policies that promote youth leadership and civic engagement can enhance their role as active agents of change.

4. **Mental Health and Well-being:** Addressing the psychological impact of past traumas and current challenges is essential for nurturing hope. Mental health support services, community-based counselling, and programmes that promote resilience and coping skills are critical components of a holistic approach to youth development.

5. **Community Engagement:** Strengthening community structures and fostering a culture of collective responsibility can enhance the supportive environment necessary for youth development. Programs that

promote intergenerational dialogue, mentorship, and community-based initiatives can reinforce the communal dimension of hope.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the role of hope as a 'currency of the future' for Sierra Leonean youth, arguing that while hope is essential, it must be understood within a broader context. The analysis has shown that youth-ness in Sierra Leone is shaped by both historical and socio-cultural factors, and that hope can be both empowering and disempowering depending on these contexts. The paper concludes by reaffirming the potential of Sierra Leonean youth and the importance of policies that support their aspirations. Future research could explore more deeply the specific ways in which hope interacts with other social forces, such as migration, global economic trends, and technological change, to influence the lives of young people in Sierra Leone.

In the current situation of Sierra Leone, its youth are lost, hopeless and powerless. It leaves the youth of Sierra Leone vulnerable, losing its cultural, social and political capital and looking to others to step in and step up to keep her up and alive.

However, the Sierra Leonean youth embody a profound potential for societal transformation, rooted in their dynamic state of youth-ness and sustained by a resilient sense of hope. Philosophically, hope as the currency of the future underscores the active engagement with possibilities and the collective pursuit of a better future. By fostering hope through targeted policies and practices that address the structural barriers faced by the youth, Sierra Leone can harness the transformative power of its young population. In doing so, the nation not only invests in its future but also reaffirms the intrinsic value of youth-ness as a driver of progress and renewal.