

Young in the City

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This case is fiction. It is however inspired by a real case from DREAMTOWN in Sierra Leone

Young, hopeful and extremely marginalized

The world is home to the largest generation of young people ever!

In Sierra Leone young people's situation is vastly different from previous generations. Sky-high unemployment rates, rapid urbanisation, migration, insecure urban environments, social media revealing global inequalities, and an alarming lack of recognition and inclusion, complicate young people's transition to productive and healthy adults.

As a consequence of a steady growing population and irreversible urbanisation, many young Sierra Leoneans end up living their lives in urban slums and informal settlements. To take a closer look at how these young people live, we'll take you to one of the slums in Freetown.

Bonga Town in the western part of Freetown is a small slum, densely populated by approximately 10,000 people sandwiched between the rich part of the city and the wetlands. There is only limited vacant land in Bonga Town. Most houses are small and tightly packed shanties built on a wooden foundation with walls and roofs of tin sheets. The shanties are separated only by narrow mud paths, and like other slums, the area is characterised by very limited vegetation and a uniform reddish-brown colour.

Bonga Town is a patchwork of different people. Some are native residents of Freetown, others have found their way as internally displaced people during the Civil War, and still others - especially young people - have moved from rural areas in the hopes of creating a better life in the city. The slum is home to various ethnic groups and people of different faiths but is widely known for its low level of conflict and religious tolerance.



Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker

Sierra Leone

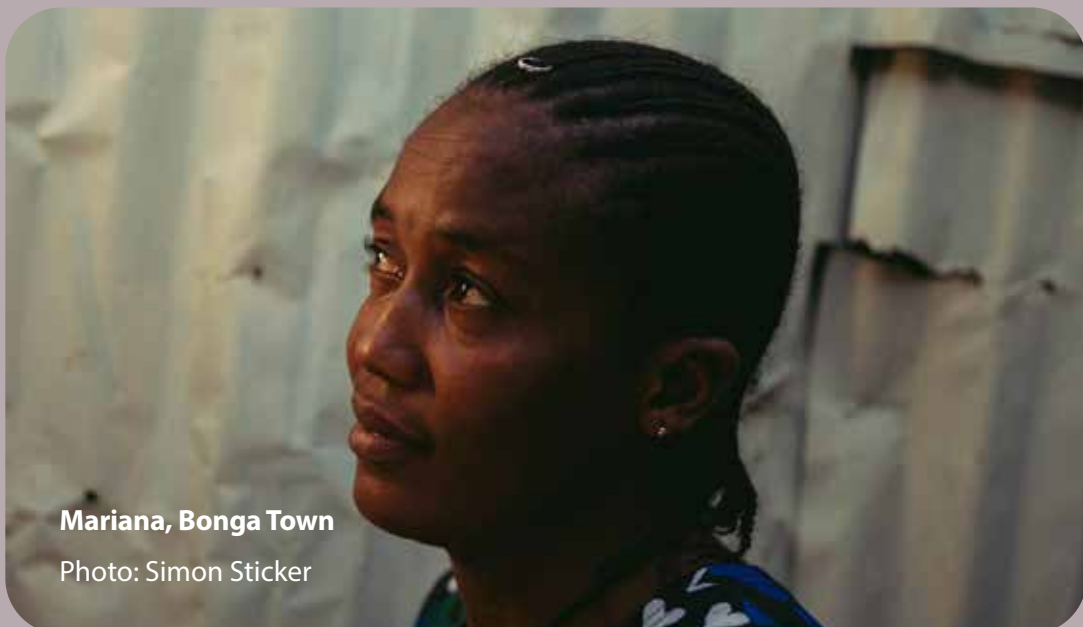
A small, poor, previously war-torn West African country rich on natural resources.

Despite a rich supply of natural resources including diamonds, iron, gold and bauxite, Sierra Leone has for decades been one of the most impoverished and least developed countries in the world with more than half of its 7.6 mil. inhabitants living below the international poverty line of 1.90 US Dollars a day (UN 2019).

Leone has experienced its share of hardships over the past 30 years including a devastating civil war from 1991-2002, the outbreak of the Ebola virus in 2014, and

natural disasters such as the 2017 mudslides in Freetown and recurrent flooding. Democracy is slowly being re-established after the war and disasters.

Sierra Leone's youthful population is fuelled by a total fertility rate of almost 5 children per woman, sustained by a continued desire for large families, low level of contraceptive use, and an early start of childbearing (CIA 2020). An estimated 60 % of the population are below the age of 25, and the age group 15-35 makes up almost 40 % of the total population (UNDP 2018).



Mariana, Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker

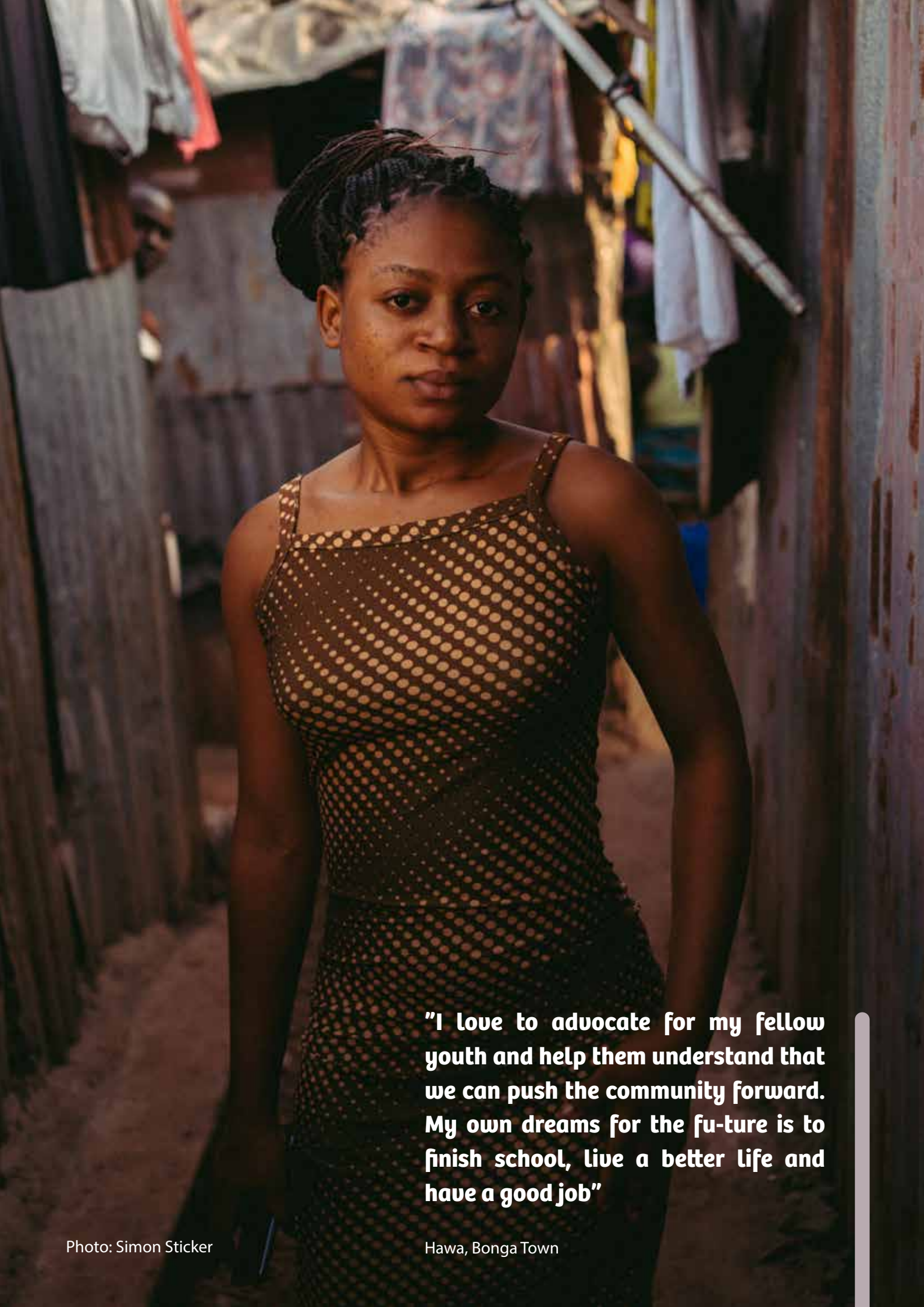
Limited space for active citizenship

Bonga Town excels in no way in leisure facilities and youth venues. There are only very few informal places where young people can meet to do sports, discuss, and exercise active citizenship. Men – young and old, rich, and poor – meet in the Ataya Base, which are vibrant makeshift tea houses, to discuss politics, their favourite football club, daily life, and experiences of poverty and discrimination. In Sierra Leone, there is usually no risk associated with talking and engaging in politics, only during election campaigns where young men are mobilised (and sometimes paid with drugs and money) to meddle in political rallies. In addition, young people in Bonga Town lack access to youth friendly public spaces, such as sport facilities and green recreational areas where they can engage in leisure activities with their peers.

In general, there are fewer places where young women can meet to talk about current issues, but the small beauty salons, local hairdressers, and cookeries often serve as a discussion club for women.

The young men and women of Bonga Town are eager to organise themselves into youth groups, to be heard and contribute their input to the development of the area and the community. However, they feel under-represented and excluded from the formal decision-making process led by government authorities and local traditional and religious leaders, including, chiefs, chairmen/-ladies, women- and youth leaders, and local councillors – each of whom has great decision-making power but limited will to initiate change.

Because of their “in-between” life situation - between childhood and adulthood, school, and job – and because of young people’s historic role as violent rebels during the Civil War – the youth in Bonga Town tend to carry a stigma associated with recklessness, irresponsibility, idleness, and violence. They constantly experience the mistrust of adults and are not recognised when they participate, express their opinions, and offer their contributions.



"I love to advocate for my fellow youth and help them understand that we can push the community forward. My own dreams for the fu-ture is to finish school, live a better life and have a good job"

Basic infrastructure and climate change

The challenges facing Sierra Leone's water and sanitation sector are aggravated by rapid population growth (especially in urban areas), environmental degradation, and climate change impacts, and the virtual absence of land-use planning capacity. Bonga Town is generally speaking unconnected to basic public infrastructure. There is no access to clean water and water shortages during dry seasons are a massive challenge. Moreover, the accumulated piles of household waste testify that there is no effective waste management system.

Only few houses are connected to the official power grid and in the absence of street lighting, the area becomes dangerous when darkness falls - especially for young women. In addition, young people in Bonga Town lack access to youth friendly public spaces, such as sport facilities and green recreational areas where they can engage in leisure activities with their peers.

Bonga Town is geographically located in high-risk areas concerning the effects of climate change (annual flooding and drought). During the rainy season, long dry periods are rapidly replaced by huge amounts of precipitation, sometimes leading to floods. Houses located close to water ways are especially vulnerable and suffer from massive floods leading to loss of lives and property each year. Additionally, with the current trends, the dry seasons gets hotter every year, and it is essential to prepare members of these communities to take adaptive measures, as they can be lifesaving. Communities in Bonga Town are organized at various levels, but there is not an effective structure to realize climate adaptations and disaster awareness raising and response.

The City of Freetown has committed to demonstrate how the city will adapt and improve its resilience to climate hazards. Freetown's first Climate Action Plan (CAP) presents innovative solutions to adapting the city to the risk climate change poses, such as flooding, coastal erosion, and landslides. The CAP seeks to reduce GHG emissions and increase resilience to climate induced risks and hazards, improve health and sanitation, urban greening, and stimulating green growth. However, informal settlements, such as Bonga Town are not included in the CAP due to the issues of land rights to the areas. Thus, not much are planned to be done in the areas of Bonga Town. Moreover, the implementation of the CAP is lacking due to limited resources (staff and funds) and low capacity on the needed climate measures at the city authorities.

Health, safety and gender based violence

Poverty, unhealthy environments with poor sanitation and limited access to health services pose a serious and general health threat to the residents of Bonga Town who are at high risk of contracting diseases. Public toilets and sanitation facilities are extremely limited and most people living in Bonga Town uses pit latrines which in combination with the open sewers that run like smelly streams pose a major health risk. Moreover, water ways are often used for waste disposal. This causes clogging of draining channels, so when the rain comes - exacerbated by climate change

– it causes the wetland water levels to rise with the result of flooding and recurrent cholera and diarrhoea outbreaks. Diseases that, due to population density, are allowed to spread rapidly, creating a genuine risk of epidemics. In addition, it is clear from recent reports of climate related incidences, that Bonga Town – in addition to flooding – experiences significant consequences with extreme temperatures during the hot summers, which create unhealthy environments.

The youth in the area must not only deal with the risk of diseases and epidemics. They are at an age where they initiate sexual activity and engage in identity-seeking and risk-taking behaviour. This all too often leads to early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as their knowledge of reproduction and sexual reproductive health is extremely limited. And while young women in particular face a high risk of sexual and gender-based violence, abuse, and harassment in their homes and not least in public spaces, young men have an increased risk of physical violence, substance abuse and ending up in criminal activity.

In a baseline survey conducted by WeDevelop and Slumberry University (2020) 52% of youth living in Bonga Town report that their home did not stay dry in the rainy season. Only 38% have safe access to toilet facilities. 81% live in homes that are connected to the electricity grid, in some case legally but in many cases illegally. Moreover, 47% of the youth report that they do not have pleasant places outside their home where they can go to spend time and relax. 68% do not have places where they can be creative, and only 19% report having access to nature or “green” spaces where they feel safe to spend time.

68% of the youth in Bonga Town feel that violence (people hurting each other) is a big problem; 78% feel that men attacking women is a moderate or big problem; and 76% find that being unable to walk safely alone is a moderate or big problem.

Cf. baseline by WeDevelop, Slumberry University (2020)

Even though the people living in Bonga Town are of mixed origins and with different religious backgrounds, gender norms are stiff and traditional. Men follow a stereotype of being firm and responsible to sustain their family. When not being able to live up to this, the local bar is a welcomed escape from the hopeless everyday life. Alcohol and the behaviour of drunk men is a major cause of fights and violence in the streets.

In addition to the risk of violence, abuse and harassment, the taboo, shame, and stigma associated with being a victim of violence, prevents young women - but also young men – from reporting cases of violence, including gender-based violence. The seriousness of the situation was publicly acknowledged when the president declared a state of emergency in relation to sexual violence. This was followed by a national campaign “Hands off our Girls”, led by the First Lady, and promises of free medical care. A promise that was later withdrawn.

Lucy, a young women entrepreneur working as a hairdresser in Bonga Town, grew up in the slum. Her story is quite typical in Bonga Town. Lucy is telling her story: I had a childhood with a father who often was drunk. This caused a lot of problems in the family. When not completely absent, my father was often in a bad mood, emotionally unstable and sometimes also violent. We children learned very early to get out of sight when his temper exploded. Our mother protected us against him, which resulted in us witnessing several times how she was beaten up.

Mother tried hard to make ends meet, buying stable food at the local market for the little money she managed to get from our father. Sometimes we went to bed hungry, but most often we got at least something to eat. Mother let us eat before she took something for herself. She supported us where she could, tried her best to raise us children in good moral. And we, my smaller sister and I tried to help in the household wherever we could.

I was happy in primary school. When reaching grade 6, I must have been around 13 years, I started after classes to pass by the square where the young boys hang out. Sometimes it got late and I had to reach home after darkness. Bonga Town is not a safe place at night. I got pregnant when I was 14. My father got furious when he heard about it. He beat me up to make me tell who the father was, but I didn't tell him. The truth is that I don't know who of the boys it was. It was a very shameful time for me. Neighbours stopped talking to me, maybe because they feared I would blame their own son for my pregnancy. I dropped out of school and focused on raising my child.

I was lucky to become friends with the young woman who owns the beauty saloon around the corner. She took me in and let me help her in the saloon. She also taught me about hair-dressing, which today gives a small income for me and my baby girl.

Few opportunities for education and employment

Most youths in Bonga Town struggle to make a living. In general, 60% of all young people in Sierra Leone are estimated to be unemployed. Some young people work as unskilled labour, as there is a lack of public and private sector jobs.

Due to the lack of education opportunities, poor quality of education, and a high degree of school dropouts, only 57% of men and 33% of women aged 15-19 are able to read well. This results in a large group of young people who have difficulties with getting formal employment. You will therefore find many young people fending for a living in the informal sector, for example by selling cell phone top up, bread and biscuits in the streets, and young men riding Okadas (motorcycle taxis) or offering themselves as day labourers.

These youth are - in the positive sense of the word - hustling their way through life, constantly having their feelers out for new livelihood opportunities and are therefore easy to engage in activities such as community cleanings where they can earn a little pocket money.

Jobs are associated with identity, a position in society and the ability to support a family. In the absence of livelihood opportunities, young people, especially young men, struggle with a feeling of inadequacy, which in some cases leads to mental problems for which some find refuge in alcohol and drugs. Another negative consequence of the lack of income opportunities is that young women may feel compelled to engage in commercial sex work.

The government's stated priorities include free primary and secondary education, economic growth, accountable governance, health, and infrastructure, but so far, the impact of the policies is not felt by the residents in Bonga Town.

The partners

The Danish NGO WeDevelop works in slum communities across Sierra Leone in a consortium with two partners, the old and reputable national NGO Y-CAS and the young and vibrant community-based organisation YHC-SL.



WEDEVELOP was established in 2017 and works for the wellbeing of young people in cities by creating safe, green, and creative public spaces in informal settlements, thereby contributing specifically to SDG 11.7.

WeDevelop seeks to promote equal access to the cities' many opportunities and making cities a place where young people's dreams come alive. It does so by developing youth-led and public urban spaces in partnership with local organisations and youth activists for the purpose of creating platforms where young people can meet, interact and learn, participate in decision making, and take active part in shaping their local community.

WeDevelop has worked in Bonga Town since 2018. They have gained lots of insight through a number of projects that today are completed. The organisation is however not known by citizens in Bonga town because they work through the two local organisations.





Y-CAS has a strong presence in the local communities, with its more than 100-year history in Sierra Leone. Y-CAS aims to empower young people and make them productive citizens. It focuses on the needs of the most vulnerable young men and women living in difficult circumstances by offering activities on governance and peace building, health, active citizenship, slum upgrading, and urban development.

In Bonga Town, Y-CAS' youth empowerment work is focusing on providing young people the opportunity to develop leadership skills and participate in decision making processes on issues that affect themselves and Bonga Town in general. Youth governance and participation is part of the organisation's strongholds. Y-CAS has a good working relationship with local authorities in the slum and also engage nationally in policy development processes on youth-relevant issues.

On an overall level the strategic approach of Y-CAS includes life skills training; delivering WASH facilities; mapping communities to establish relevant data for informed engagements; establishing and supporting community-based disaster management committees; and establishing recreational community centres. In practice Y-CAS has however not implemented projects within these topics in Bonga Town. The only recent activity in this slum was a youth leader training with focus on youth participation in local decision-making processes.



YOUTH HOPE CENTRE, SIERRA LEONE (YHC-SL) has existed since 2007. It works to promote skills and education amongst disadvantaged youth, women, and children by conducting free non-formal education programmes in safe places where students can learn and study effectively. Its strategic approach includes providing Non-Formal Education, Technical Vocational Skills Training, and Information Communication Technology (ICT) and Media Training. The organisation also works in close collaboration with smaller community-based organisations (CBOs) and local youth groups,

providing capacity building support to help these grow into stronger civil society actors and engage in community development.

In partnership with WeDevelop and local CBOs, YHC-SL has supported the development of eight public community centres for youth across three cities in Sierra Leone. One centre is located in Bonga Town. The public community centre in Bonga Town is about to become a place where young people can hang out in a safe environment. Sometimes it hosts social activities. One volunteer from a different part of Freetown comes once a while to hold educational workshops. A local guy is in charge of holding basic ICT workshops for boys and girls.

YHC-SL is run by a small group of committed young volunteers. The organisation has recently suffered from key staff leaving when they move on to other job opportunities, increasing the need for more formalised job description and handover of gained knowledge and competencies.

YHC-SL has recently got a new female leader, who is working on increasing their focus on gender issues in community development and on awareness about gender-based violence.

men use film as a tool to create awareness and dialogue around sensitive issues. The collaboration with Dreamtown includes production of the different types of participatory videos that are integrated into capacity building and advocacy activities.



"All is not lost. Let's come on board and see what we can do, instead of just sitting down. In the end, you are going to be the leader that will steer the activities of the community. I hope to see a better Bonga Town. We are working on it"

James, Bonga Town

Photo: Simon Sticker