

## **The 'Crisis of Youth' Revisited: Intergenerational Conflict in Sierra Leone**

Johanna Boersch-Supan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Oxford, Department for Politics and International Relations, Oxford, United Kingdom

johanna.boersch-supan@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Youth, the age group between 15 and 35, make up an estimated 35 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's population. Given the low life expectancy on the continent they are the most productive and active group. At the same time, they are also the most destructive and dangerous as they are over-represented in armed rebel and insurgency movements, political violence and criminal activities. In virtually all African countries youth are marginalized in national state policies and have weak legal positions. Distribution of social, political and economic resources is locked into patronage networks marked by a strong male, gerontocratic bias.

Drawing on survey and interview data from six rural and urban field sites in Sierra Leone, this paper analyzes strategies of youthful actors to attain more egalitarian and democratic modes of decision-making and resource distribution in local communities. In the context of major international funding for post-conflict reconstruction, I find that the agency with which local groups capitalize on international interventions is central to these intergenerational power struggles. First, youth draw on the international human rights discourse to contest traditional rights and responsibilities. The language of rights is instrumentalized to challenge established modes of private and public intergenerational relations, such as parenting and teaching, as well as question potentially exploitative communal practices such as forced community labor and customary dispensation of justice. Second, international funding and organizational support foster youth participation and representation. Formal youth representation has been established in local governance institutions while youth organizations act as self-help groups providing many youth-headed households with income generation strategies. However, established elites are quick in employing counter strategies to re-assert gerontocratic dominance, subverting larger-scale transformation of social relations. These processes of intergenerational negotiation and contestation hold lessons beyond the immediate Sierra Leonean case on tackling the African "crisis of youth".