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**Bangura, Kabba Santigie, Gbanie, Solomon and Lynch,  
Kenneth ORCID: 0000-0002-5296-2864 (2018) Cultivating  
Young Agriculturalists; Kenema, Sierra Leone. Urban  
Agriculture Magazine, 35. pp. 35-37.**

Official URL: <https://www.ruaf.org/cultivating-young-agriculturalists-kenema-sierra-leone>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/6250>

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Kenema, Sierra Leone

# Cultivating Young Agriculturalists

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*Three young women water their plots on the edge of Kenema. Photo by Kenneth Lynch*

**Sierra Leone suffered a devastating civil war between 1991 and 2002 and an Ebola virus disease outbreak in 2014/15. During the war many people, many of them young, fled the conflict by heading to the city for protection. As a result, Sierra Leone is experiencing a post-conflict and post-epidemic economic and demographic recovery. The country shows evidence of economic growth, electoral stabilisation and improving human development indicators. These indicators include school enrolment, which grew 115 per cent in 2016, and life expectancy at birth, which increased from 35 years in the middle of the war to 51 years in 2016 (World Bank, 2018). The population was seven million in the 2015 census (up from five million recorded in the 2004 census), of whom 80 per cent were under 35 years of age and 41 per cent under 15 years (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017). Considerable challenges remain.**

In Kenema (Sierra Leone's second largest city by population and the largest city in the east of the country) this situation is smaller-scale but no less acute. Kenema was a crucial strategic location during the civil war, with the local militia (known as "Kamajors") resisting the incursion of the rebel forces for most of the duration of the conflict, occasionally with the support of peacekeeping forces. It became an important enclave during this period, attracting many refugees and internally displaced people fleeing the conflict. During the Ebola epidemic, Kenema Hospital was in the front line of the fight to tackle the disease, as the city is one

of the closest to the epicentre of the original outbreak. Because Kenema District Hospital had some facilities to treat patients it became a focus for the international response. Sierra Leone carried out its fourth census in 2015 and Kenema recorded a population of 609,000, of whom one-sixth were born outside Kenema and migrated to the city and 77 per cent are under 35 years of age. These statistics highlight the city's significant in-migration and very young population (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017).

Kenema is now recovering, growing and developing rapidly. In Kenema and in Sierra Leone, young people represent both a challenge and an opportunity for the development of the city and the country (Restless Development Sierra Leone, 2012). The challenge lies in the fact that so many young people have grown up during the civil war and the immediate post-conflict period, leading to adverse effects on their childhood and education. The opportunity is inherent in the fact that they are the key members of the population who are economically, socially and sexually active and therefore important to the future development of the country and the reproduction of the population. With over 100 established youth groups active in agriculture in Kenema district, the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) has established a database of organisations. NAYCOM engages youth through radio broadcasts, talking to young people in the street and in public gatherings in order to sensitise, train and mobilise them. NAYCOM observes that urban youths are trapped in declining and scarce urban jobs. This includes diverse categories of youth, especially those who feel hopeless, meaningless and not useful to society. As a government institution under the Ministry of Youth Affairs, NAYCOM works with young people, aiming to reorient them towards urban agriculture for income generation and food security, to replace antisocial and criminal behaviour (e.g., drug addiction, urban crime, gangsterism and violence), through working, liaising and tapping into their potential for individual and community or city development (Sama, personal communication, 2017).

The following are extracts from interviews with three young urban farmer respondents:

### Respondent 1

*"I do not have any formal learned skills in agriculture. What I do have is basic farming skills I acquired in the farm work I used to do, growing rice together with a few vegetables on my parents' farm in the village. I was a petty trader. I lost my husband in early 1996 during a rebel attack in Kailahun District and relocated here in Kenema city. Circumstance compelled me and I entered into urban farming in 1996. There was nothing left for me and my two children to live on, so I took up growing vegetables on a rented swamp close to my residence. I grow vegetables all year round and rice during the wet season to sustain me and my two children. I am indebted to the landowner for allowing me to work on his land at a low annual cost. Eighty to ninety per cent of the vegetables I grow are sold either on the garden or on the market. I usually receive about SLL150,000 a month (approx. USD17) between November and April/May each year. The income from the farm is what I use to support my children to go to school and meet my personal and family needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc). The rice I grow is used, though not sufficient, for daily consumption. Urban agriculture is very important to me because I am not educated nor do I have any trade to seek a job. Even if I have all these, unemployment is a big issue. I need support from everyone to increase food production, raise more money and make this urban farming work much more beneficial to me."*

### Respondent 2

*"I learned about farming in my village in Sorogbema Chiefdom, Pujehun District. In the war years my husband was captured and became a "Kamajor" fighter, a local militia. He never returned from the day he was taken away, and I migrated to Kenema city four months later in 1996. Initially I stopped doing agriculture in my new location. As "internally displaced" I got agriculture training from the Rural Training Institute (RTI) camp in Kenema city. After the training I started full-time agriculture on my own during the war in 1996. Apart from the training I got at RTI I did not have any opportunity to go to school or an agriculture institute. In Kenema city I rented a room to a man who owned a swamp and I arranged to work on his land with the condition to share between us the income generated from the garden work I do. I developed a very strong interest in urban agriculture because I was encouraged by the income that I generated – which I used to sustain myself (daily consumption), pay house and swamp rent, buy medication and meet other needs of my one-parent family."*

### Respondent 3

*"During the peak of the civil war in 1998 my parents were killed, while my brother and two elder sisters were forced to join the rebels who attacked us in Bo District. My elder sisters became sex partners of the rebel commanders that attacked our town. In 1999 I lost my brother and two sisters, and a few weeks later I became a dangerous fighter to revenge the loss of my family members. I joined the attack in Kenema in 2000 and was captured by ECOMOG [Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group] troops securing Kenema city when I came to spy on their location for a later attack. I gave them the impression that I was running away from rebels who had attacked and killed my family. I was sent, with strict surveillance, to the RTI displaced peoples camp in Kenema city. As a young fighter I was exposed to drugs, cannabis and hard liquor. "After the war in 2002 I decided to stay in Kenema city but was living the hard way: no job, no skill learned except the agriculture training I got in the camp. I started to find quick ways to make money in the city and got involved in selling cannabis in a ghetto, stealing, washing cars and commercial bikes; then I became a commercial bike rider. I got involved in urban crime with the police after me as a result of these urban engagements I did just to earn a living or survive. Through the local stakeholders (the National Youth Commission, District Agriculture Division and Kenema City Council) I was enlisted for support directed to young people in urban and periurban agriculture in Kenema city. I embarked on vegetable and rice production as a source of earning income and food to sustain myself through the help of the head man at Samai Town, who assisted me with 0.5 acre of swamp. I cultivated rice two times a year during the rainy and dry seasons and produced exotic and leafy vegetables, all for the market, on the upland during the rainy season and in the swamp during the dry season. I sell my harvested vegetables to vegetable retailers within Kenema city and beyond. Some came from Bo city and Freetown. The income I earn from my garden is not only secure but it has given me respect in my community. Now I am contributing to the development of my community in the areas of food production and availability, food security and good health. Thanks to my new work as a young urban farmer, my dignity is restored and I now have a future."*

These testimonies illustrate the opportunity that urban agriculture provides to young people who have no skills or qualification other than what they have learned on their parents' farms and what they may have practised before the circumstances of war overtook them. These three examples were picked from a sample of 250 young farmers in Kenema city.



View of a Kenema urban agriculture site where many of the cultivators are young people. Photo by Kenneth Lynch



Photo by Kenneth Lynch

Fourah Bay College Geographers are conducting research in Kenema, gathering evidence of the experience of young farmers around the city. A key focus of this work is their motivation, experiences and challenges based on similar work carried out in Freetown, the country's capital (Lynch et al., 2013). The work is ongoing, but preliminary analysis shows that the young farmers reported themselves as predominantly uneducated, engaging in farming because of limited employment prospects and as a livelihood strategy. However, a significant proportion also expressed their views that the farming was very good for empowering youth, important for poverty alleviation and an important source of good nutrition and for recycling urban waste.

The preliminary results of this research point out that more understanding is needed of the challenges facing young people in cities emerging from conflict or other humanitarian disaster, and demonstrate the potential of urban agriculture to provide livelihood opportunities. NAYCOM has begun this work and there is a role for city authorities, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Education.

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