

# Imagining the Future of the Transition from “Youth” to “Adult”: A Case Study of a Futures Literacy Knowledge Laboratory<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In May of 2013 a meeting was convened at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center to start an exploration of the changes taking place in how the future is integrated into decision-making. On the initiative of UNESCO Foresight twenty-three people from around the world gathered to discuss how recent thinking and experience with anticipatory systems and collective intelligence knowledge laboratories are opening up new opportunities for efforts to understand and act in a creatively complex emergent world. Out of the carefully designed process undertaken at Bellagio a series of research oriented experiments were launched.

The aim of these processes was threefold: First to create an opportunity to generate research quality evidence of the anticipatory systems that people are deploying in their everyday lives and as part of broader decision-making processes. Second to detect in equally rigorous fashion the different communities of practice that touch or crisscross the anticipatory systems people are using to integrate the future into their perceptions and actions. Third to create value at the local level by addressing a critical issue of clear pertinence to local participants and as part of this exercise in anticipatory thinking to provide an opportunity to develop the participants futures literacy.

Amongst the projects initiated in Bellagio were events in the Philippines, Brazil, Norway and Sierra Leone. This article tells the story of the event conducted from January 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014, at the Hill Valley Hotel, Freetown, Sierra Leone, led by Kewulay Kamara. The topic, from the outset was the issue of how young people “grow-up” or the transition from “youth” to “adult”. This topic was selected because it covers an issue of central importance to Sierra Leone. Young people represent the majority of the population in Sierra Leone. Yet they are struggling to find meaning and identity. They are having trouble constructing the social relationships, inter-dependencies and responsibilities that give substance to adulthood. The aim of the preliminary design of the experiment initiated in Bellagio was to use the future to reconsider the nature of the challenges facing young people in Sierra Leone.

The primary motivation at a local level for conducting this FL Knowlab was the opportunity for participants to look at the potential around them with new eyes and tell stories that identify pathways to hope. In Freetown the means for engaging participant’s collective intelligence

pass through forms of expression and inter-action that are deeply rooted in the specific realities of Sierra Leone today. The FL Knowlab offered a privileged and contextualized space for negotiating shared meaning by using the open, imaginary and imaginative future to reflect on the assumptions and questions that underpin policies and expectations. Building on design insights provided by an FL Knowlab run with young people in Paris the week before, the experience in Sierra Leone demonstrated how a diverse group of people can at once develop their capacity to use the future, discover and invent rich stories about the past, present and future, and provide policy relevant analysis pointing to new initiatives and next steps.

### **Approach and Design**

The Freetown FL Knowlab was structured around introducing foresight tools, working with these tools in groups, presenting the group work to the workshop, and discussions. Opening with a daily ritual of libation infused music, poetry and dance to maintain excitement and participation, but also to render explicit the relevance of local tradition to the workshop. Abundant use was made of storytelling which included personal stories; stories about the myths of “youth” and “adult” that underlie teenage out-of-wedlock pregnancies and anti-social behaviors; and stories (myths) about country (economy, government and society) as well as stories about ethnicity, ethnic conflicts, rural-urban migration and education.

The design of the FL Knowlab and the facilitation made clear that the process involves a collaborative approach to learning and using the future to leverage collective intelligence. The direction taken by discussions reflect the views and knowledge of the participants – explicit and implicit – the carefully structured conversations provide an opportunity for people to articulate and make sense of their understanding of the world around them.

### **Specifics of the Sierra Leone FL Knowlab**

An important part of public ceremony in Sierra Leone is the prayer ritual generally conducted in the Muslim or Christian traditions. However, a Libation is a pervasive opening ritual that is also deeply rooted in many African communities. This tradition, which involves calling on the ancestral spirits, is still practiced in families and close communities in Sierra Leone today. In essence, it is an offering with three essential elements brought together through storytelling. It begins by identifying the community and its ancestors (history); it proceeds to a discussion of the present; and closes by looking towards the future. The intimacy of the exercise builds trust. A facilitator, possibly a storyteller, strives for maximum participation of all who gather in the circle. Underlying this ritual is an appreciation of the power of words to create and transform reality, a point-of-view that is a salient part of African philosophical and religious traditions.

For the Sierra Leone FL Knowlab the opening libation was preceded by a short survey<sup>3</sup> and then followed by an exercise using the Futures Triangle<sup>4</sup>, which underscores the continuity of past, present and future that was evoked by the libation. The Futures Tri-angle was followed by an exercise using the Futures Wheel. The Futures Wheel<sup>5</sup> has the advantage of opening participant to seeing how individual stories are inter-related but with a diversity of outcomes for individuals and groups. At this point, the group was ready to work on a Causal Layered Analysis

(CLA) exercise. Conducting a CLA process is useful for deepening participant’s understanding of the present and demonstrating the power of existing discourses and narratives by revealing the relationship to inner metaphors, individual and group actions, and societal outcomes. Undertaking a CLA process allows participants to begin to imagine alternative outcomes via alternative metaphors. Imagining alternative outcomes helps to inspire and liberate the conversation, facilitating the invention of non-extrapolatory futures. The process includes a discussion of the least to the most preferred future as well as a discussion of old and new metaphors rooted in the local culture. Participants start to tell stories that make explicit how such futures can be understood as efforts to colonize tomorrow with yesterday’s models or emulate some already “discarded” future from somewhere else. This part of the FL Knowlab process serves to reframe the original stories, not only giving permission but also helping to provide the methods needed to move the conversation beyond already existing futures.

Overall the Sierra Leone FL Knowlab put storytelling in the center of understanding the “youth” to “adult” transition and creating “new” knowledge. Ronald Kayanja, a participant from the UNESCO Regional office in Abuja, Nigeria, summarized the event:

The workshop followed a participatory approach, with the facilitator using what the young people know and are passionate about to enable them reflect on their personal lives and their country. The discussions brought out issues that concern them most: adulthood and how the war impacted on the definition (with child soldiers and teenage parents etc); youth unemployment; teenage sexual activity and the consequences; challenges of urbanization; trauma from the war; and the challenge of inclusion. Those issues were discussed in depth, with the young people providing causes, effects and possible solutions.

## **The Governing Myth**

Participants in the Freetown FL Knowlab engaged in lengthy discussions of the history of Sierra Leone, including the nature of corruption over time. Stories were told that revealed ambiguities in hierarchies such as age and status as well as the stifling effect of gender discrimination in the current institutional context. The intangible yet governing myths of family, responsibility and rights combined with these hierarchies seem to set the stage for pervasive dependency and legitimize “corruption.”

According to the participants in the Freetown FL Knowlab corruption is not confined to business and politics. Corruption can also be found in so called cultural values such as those of the extended family which oblige the more fortunate to shoulder responsibility for the perpetuation of “traditions” that exploit others: less fortunate relatives could be subject to near servitude in the name of “helping to raise” them; invasive practices that traumatize young girls so that they expect little more than exploitation from men are carried out in the name of protecting chastity. Rituals such as circumcision, which once occurred in the context of a long learning and sense-making process that spanned many years, are now reduced to children

being awoken in the night and whisked away for circumcision. Not long ago, circumcision for men and women represented the final stage of “adulthood” training. Not any more. Some are obliged to “carry the basket” of the practice of “circumciser” as the family tradition is passed down from mother to daughter largely because of the material reward it brings.

### **“Youth”: A Moving Target**

Efforts by participants to imagine the future actually spurred much reflection and discussion of the conditions of post civil war youth. In fact it was noted that the contemporary meaning of the concept of “youth” in Sierra Leone was significantly shaped through neighborhood watch activities during the war. Back then many of the unemployed were teenage and twenty-somethings who are now in their 30s, and 40s. Some were combatants. Many are now still unemployed or marginally employed. They still continue to be regarded as “youth”. In a country where adulthood has come to be subtly defined by the ability to gain independent sustenance, the status of youth has effectively been extended beyond a particular age or rite of passage. While some younger people might have reached responsible “adulthood” because they can provide for themselves, other much older individuals are still regarded as “youth” because they cannot “provide.” While others might believe that they express their manhood by being “a baby father.” And young girls subtly internalize the culture of dependence for survival: i.e. they get impregnated so that the father can take responsibility for them.

All of these stories helped to develop a deeper understanding of the present challenges facing this youthful population. However the workshop also explored stories of individuals and groups in Sierra Leone and throughout Africa, engaged in innovation and experimentation using their imaginations and ability to invent. Reflecting on these stories participants gained greater appreciation for the capacity of ritual and storytelling traditions to deepen our understanding of issues by creating new knowledge and revealing other futures. The process made clear the transformative power of reframing undertaken through conscious evaluation of the anticipatory systems and outcomes that both include and go beyond pervasive myths. Participants also gained an appreciation of diversity through the stories that were told during the workshop. In many cases these stories had implications for governance, individual responsibility and awareness-raising. Many of these points were dramatized in the skits created and performed by workshop groups.

### **Rich content, the fruits of collective intelligence**

A set of recurring stories related to the relationship between food security and unemployment. Many pointed out that the price of domestically produced rice is so low that farmers prefer to sell their produce to the Republic of Guinea and Liberia. They cannot compete with imported rice, or food aid. Yet others pointed to the poor road infrastructure and food shortages in the cities, and lower incentives for agriculture. In these stories, the state of the agricultural sector was linked to rural-urban migration, unemployment and prostitution and other anti-social activities, some of which are being exacerbated by social media. The same analysis of the deeper metaphors that shape ideas of the future and govern people’s lives suggests that the alarming exploitation of youth in the mining sector is also related to the poor

state of agriculture combined with government actions or inaction.

## The Old Metaphors

Three interlocking set myth/metaphors seem to define the current malaise. One myth revolves around the people in authority as family member, “Pa” and “Mamy” as providers who are presumed to act in the best interest of the people around them. They “take care” of their dependents. Their mere position elevates them to this unquestionable pedestal with little need for accountability. The less well off often give their children to be educated by relatives that then exploit these children in every way with impunity. Every member of the family turns to the Pa to solve his/her immediate, usually financial, problem. Pa is expected to put the family, which could extend to the clan and “tribe,” above the interest of the public in general. This provides a perfect segue into the next interrelated and enabling metaphor for corruption: “wherever you tie a cow, that is where it will graze.” So the public official uses his/her office to “take care” of his own with impunity. All these factors interact to perpetuate a culture of dependence. To complete the circle of metaphors, the “adult” as “provider,” at the very least provide for themselves regardless of age or means. What happens when a younger person in the family is the “provider?” In this case the tables are turned. Just as they were turned during the war when the young had access to guns and power and could command their elders. One is not “youth” if able to provide for themselves and others. In the evolving culture of “wealth trumps age and position”, supported by globalized consumer and social media, respect for age and other cultural values vested in community and family fall by the wayside.

## The New Metaphors

Writing about the results of the FL Knowlab, Ronal Kayanja noted:

Probably most striking was how the young people freely expressed themselves with such passion and tears. It showed some deep-seated need for them to ‘explode’ and understand themselves before they can reconstruct their reality. This is crucial in a society still reeling from the bloody conflict that shocked the world.

While the early part of the workshop saw the emergence of differing preconceptions of ethnic groups, men and women, the telling of personal stories brought the commonality and interrelationship to the forefront. There are indeed parallel, alternative metaphors buried under the surface. One of the metaphors is a saying in Krio, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone: “We all na wan,” we are all one. Looking forward, the workshop considered other myths such “we all are one”, which promotes unity in the face of ethnic, religious, and social diversity. This suggests a “wicked problem” approach in which “communities of interest” bringing stakeholders across sectors can be networked to start redefining the problems, opening up horizons for entirely new solutions.

## Conclusion: Next Steps

### Sierra Leone Foresight Network

At the conclusion of the second day, participants expressed interest in “spreading the word” to other youth throughout the country. Aware of the plethora of NGOs and “youth organizations” that have sprung up in response to the variety of problems, but without much positive impact so far, the participants decided not to create a new body but to continue their work through a local foresight network in association with UNESCO and Baden Partners in Sierra Leone. This network could provide the structure for spreading knowledge about new ways of using the future in order to build futures literacy throughout Sierra Leone, with specific attention to youth in transition.

### Reflection on Storytelling and Ritual: the Sierra Leone Futures Literacy Experience?

It is easy to imagine that the Sierra Leone FL Knowlab experience can be adapted to other localities. The experience focused on storytelling as an important tool. Giving people a way to express themselves through a story taps into an inner need to tell our story. Telling stories also opens us to conversations that can help to make sense of our situation. It builds bonds amongst participants. Storytelling helps transcend background and training. Storytelling (creation) make sense of the past while also implicating the future. These stories reveal more about how we understand the past than the actual events. Therefore, a storytelling session in any community can be used to reveal how people of that community understand the past and use the future. We live by myths and legends, carriers and shapers of how we imagine the future, even when they are disguised as history and biography. Our current concerns and our state of mind shape the stories we tell. This state speaks to our context and it limits our understanding of the past and how that relates to the present. Therefore, storytelling sessions can be used as tools for exposing underlying tensions and limitations in our understanding of the past as seen from the current and future contexts. Stories guide our lives, in part by imposing limits and in part by taking us outside those limits. Stories can bring the future into the present.

At the heart of most rituals and ceremonies are stories. The ritual adds weight to the stories we tell, gives them significance beyond their “entertainment value.” The ritual helps participants to appreciate importance of engagement for the success of an exercise, like a FL Uknowlab, that aims to enhance people’s understanding the ways in which they use the future. Culturally grounded rituals and stories that participants can relate to directly makes the difference for this approach. Starting with a libation as was done for the Sierra Leone FL Uknowlab is a good example. However, this process must walk a fine line between stories that make participants too comfortable and those that are too disturbing. In Sierra Leone it was essential, in the judgment of the facilitator to give precedence the participants personal stories over the more analytically and disruptive accounts of societal change. As a result the agenda cannot be fixed, but must be adapted to the process as it unfolds. This is part of the good design of a collective intelligence knowledge laboratory and ensured that the search for evidence of people’s anticipatory systems and communities of practice could be completed.



## **Annex: Partners, materials, sharing, and composition of participation**

### **Partners**

Both Mr. Konneh, Commissioner, Sierra Leone National Commission on UNESCO, and Mr. Koroma, Commissioner, Sierra Leone Youth Commission, expressed regret that they could not attend the first workshop but reaffirmed their willingness to continue to work together with UNESCO to use the future to build local capacity and empower specific solutions. Part of the follow-through from this first event involves Mr. Kewulay Kamara working with Mr. Konneh and Mr. Koroma to draft a proposal for a foresight conference and workshops throughout the country to be funded by the government of Sierra Leone through its Ministry of Finance and Economic Development.

### **Materials**

Some participants noted the absence of audio/visual tools. Future foresight workshops could greatly benefit from multi-media technology. Such materials in conjunction with the refined rituals could enhance the quality of the experience. The current members of the evolving Sierra Leone Foresight Network could develop such materials.

### **Sharing the Sierra Leone Experience**

Mr. Ronald Kayanja of the UNESCO Regional Office in Abuja, voiced the possibility that the experience of the FL Knowlab in Sierra Leone might help with healing and rehabilitation in other post-conflict zones in Africa (see Annex 2).

### **Composition of participation**

7 young participants all under 30 years of age, none of whom receives a regular salary:

- 1 college graduate (male)
- 1 college student (male)
- 1 (male) drummer and traditional performance artist from the Sierra Leone National Dance Troup
- 1 (female) singer, actress
- 1 model and youth leader (female)
- 1 journalist and social entrepreneur (female)
- 1 Visual artist (male)

1 Junior secondary school principal and social service worker (male)

1 former director of the American International School of Freetown and current director of an NGO (SELI) dedicated to teaching writing in English and indigenous languages in several districts in Sierra Leone (female)

4 Participating observers from the Capstone Program (Wagner School, New York University) (all female)

1 Participating observer from UNESCO Regional Office (Abuja, Nigeria)

1 Facilitator (male)

1 Reporter from the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation

## **Notes**

- 1 Acknowledgements: Many people contributed to this project and article. Riel Miller, a long time friend and futurist, currently at UNESCO takes primary credit

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- 2 Kewulay Kamara is a storyteller from Sierra Leone, he is the founder and director of Badenya, a not-for-profit organization that utilizes the presentation of African arts as a community building and bridge building tool. <http://kewulaykamara.com/about-kewulay>
- 3 These surveys were part of the research protocol for the experiments conducted as part of the UNESCO-Rockefeller Foundation project on Scoping Global/Local Anticipatory Capacities. See the forthcoming report of this project, to be posted at <http://www.futuresliteracy.org>
- 4 The Futures Triangle is a tool developed by Sohail Inayatullah, along with Causal Layered Analysis, etc. For more information see: <http://www.meta-future.org> and for a specific discussion of the Futures Triangle see: <http://chrisriedy.me/2012/11/05/the-futures-triangle/>
- 5 The Futures Wheel is a longstanding foresight tool, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futures\\_wheel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Futures_wheel)

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