

NGO in the field



HELPING Sierra Leone's Children of War

Of the many horrors of the civil war in Sierra Leone, none has been more tragic than the use of children—some as young as 7—as soldiers, child labourers and sex slaves. Rebuilding the lives of these war-affected children is a considerable challenge. Canadian aid workers Paul and Beverley Carrick are helping to meet it.

The Carricks are the founders of Christian Aid for Under-Assisted Societies Everywhere (CAUSE) Canada, a non-governmental organization based in Canmore, Alberta. CAUSE makes a point of going to areas where few other NGOs venture.

Supporting the Carricks' work in Sierra Leone is the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). In July 1999, CAUSE received funding to build shelters and distribute basic domestic items (pots, mats, etc.) to persons displaced by the war.

More recently, a \$500 000 contribution from CIDA's Peacebuilding Fund has helped CAUSE foster reconciliation in Sierra Leone. The organization works with former child soldiers, orphans, and children who have suffered physically or psychologically, helping them re-integrate into their communities.

"We are teaching them to make nets and boats for deep-sea fishing, carpentry, auto mechanics, soap making, tie-dyeing and tailoring," says Paul Carrick.

photos: CAUSE Canada



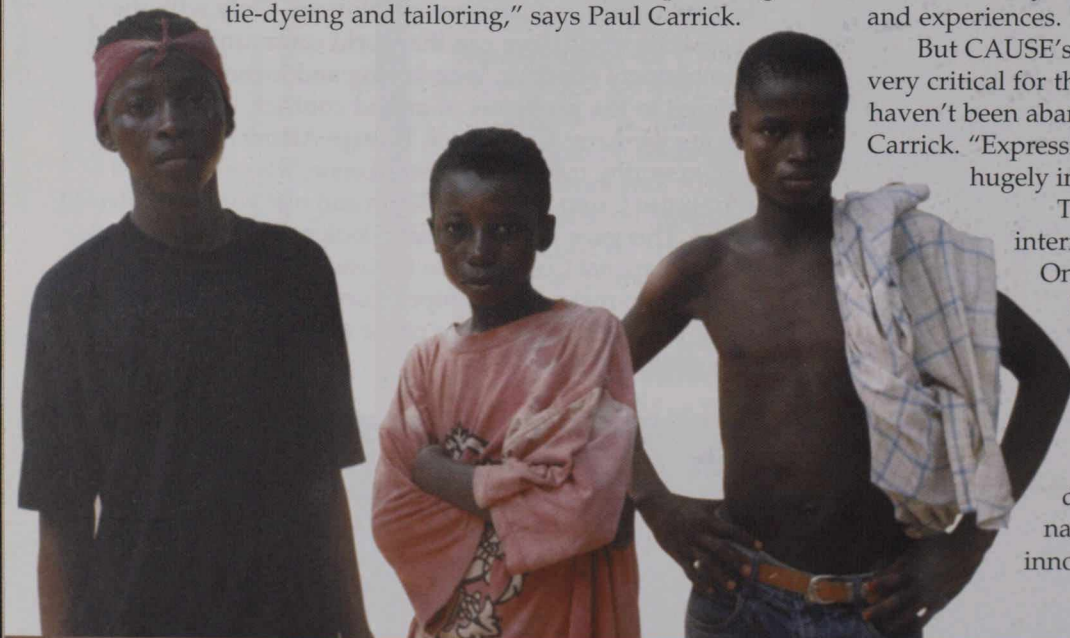
Some are also learning to make crutches and wheelchairs for the thousands of Sierra Leoneans (including children) who were injured or deliberately maimed in the war.

The problems of former child soldiers are less visible but no less real. Many saw their families killed and then were forced to commit similar atrocities. Some don't know where they came from; many know only their military identities—nicknames such as "Rambo" or "Killer Boy." Carrick describes a recent rechristening ceremony in which the children gave themselves new names, such as Prince and Mohammed.

Theatre is another therapeutic tool. Borrowing from Africa's dynamic storytelling tradition, CAUSE workers are teaching 200 former combatants in a child-soldier centre to stage plays for the community. This is a way for them to express their feelings and experiences.

But CAUSE's presence has another vital purpose. "It's very critical for the people of Sierra Leone to sense that they haven't been abandoned by the rest of the world," says Paul Carrick. "Expressing solidarity with people in crisis is hugely important."

That's why the group has called on the international community for action on two fronts. One is ending the flow of illegal arms into Sierra Leone from what Carrick calls "an evil industry that needs to have the plug pulled on it." The other is establishing an effective peacekeeping force. "I would argue," says Carrick, "that no more than 10 000 trained men have hijacked a country of 5 million people for a decade. It would be great to disarm them in the name of the 99 percent of the population who are innocent victims desperate for peace." ●



CAUSE Canada relies on private donations and support from funding agencies. For more information, visit its Web site (www.cause.ca) or write to CAUSE Canada at P.O. Box 8100, Canmore, Alberta T1W 2T8.