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The Role of Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction (The Case of Liberia)

Marit Woods
SIT Graduate Institute

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**The Role of Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction
(THE CASE OF LIBERIA)**

Marit Woods

PIM 69

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Service,
Leadership, and Management at the SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

Claire Halverson

October 9, 2011

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Student name: Marit G. Woods Date: October 25, 2011

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Abstract

African youth today no longer want to view themselves as future leaders; instead they want to be viewed as leaders of today who have the ability to shape their own future. Despite the limited opportunities available to youth in the developing world, they strive to become contributors to their communities. Once the world realizes the importance of empowering youth, young Africans will have more opportunities to excel. The purpose of this inquiry is to answer “What opportunities are available for Liberian youth (15-35 years old), and how can these opportunities enhance youth participation in the National Reconstruction Process?” Utilizing qualitative research methods, this study analyzes the role that the young people in Liberia play in reconstructing their country, after fifteen years of civil war. The findings of this inquiry include definitional statements on the purposes of youth, and reconstruction. This inquiry addresses how the private and public sectors can better facilitate the empowerment of Liberian youth.

Acronyms

Unless stated otherwise the following abbreviations stand for:

SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
FCYO	Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing
PYD	Positive Youth development
FLY	Federation of Liberian Youth
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
NGOs	Non Governmental Organizations
NYP	National Youth Policy
TVET	Technical Vocational Education Training
UN	United Nations
WB	World Bank
USAID	United States Aid for International Development
NYVSP	National Youth Volunteering Service Program
SFCG	Search for Common Ground
PSI	Population Services International
YMCA	Young Men Christian Association
YTJP	Youth on the Job Training Program
MCC	Monrovia City Council
AYC	African Youth Charter

Introduction

“More often than not Africa has treated youth as a supporting category rather than a subject of exclusive inquiry. Be that as it may, citizenship has become a matter of concern as increasing numbers of young people experience blocked opportunities, reduced access to necessary resources, and social exclusion in their endeavor to negotiate the complex pathways to full participation in adult society”

(as cited in Fokwang, 2006,p. 69)

In most African countries, youth are marginalized in mainstream society, resulting in unemployment and underemployment, restricted access to information, exposure to violence and crime, inequalities in income, wealth, and power. (African Youth Charter, 2006)

For centuries, African tradition has dictated an inferior-superior relationship between youth and adults. In most cultures rooted in an oral tradition, it is commonly believe that a sense of history, as well as wisdom is contingent on age. Therefore, adults are considered to have superior knowledge, experience, and capacity to make decisions that are in the best interest of the society. Globalization, universal demands for respect of human rights, and sensitivity to marginalized demographics like youth and women in global affairs have led to a burgeoning demand for participation among African youth. As they are now exposed to practices that acknowledge their role in national development, they demand respect for their views and they are no longer willing to accept exclusion from participating in the development of their countries. Over the years, numerous conferences such as the African Youth and Governance

Conferences have been organized by youth in different parts of Africa to discuss ways to enhance participation in the national decision-making process.

In the case of Liberia, post-war reconstruction commenced six years ago after more than fifteen years of civil conflict. In spite of a comprehensive national agenda, there is a lack of uniformity on how youth participation in the national development process can be institutionalized. As the country continues on the path of reconstruction, youth continue to demand their voices be heard. It is crucial for those in power to recognize the importance of including the next generation of national leaders in the process of reconstruction. Sustained growth and development in Liberia will be unachievable if youth are excluded from the decision-making process.

Undoubtedly, youth in Liberia have innovative, progressive ideas and potential which must be explored in an empowering environment. The election of Africa's and Liberia's first female President has created a new platform to discuss the plight of women as a marginalized group. In pre-civil war women were marginalized, but since the election of a female president, the opportunities for women to advance in all sectors have improved significantly.

As Liberia embarks on a national reconstruction agenda, it is important to recognize that the participation of youth is an indispensable vehicle for sustaining and maintaining progress. The current state of Liberia's youth must be analyzed, with the goal of integrating them into the national dialogue. By evaluating and exploring their adolescent years, Liberian youth will uncover their strengths and weaknesses, and how they can be utilized for their advancement.

To guarantee the inclusion of Liberian youth, it is important to critically review their roles, and work with them to ensure that they contribute to the national efforts. Such an initiative will ensure that their full potential is harnessed, and national development assured. No society can discover its full potential without including youth in their development process.

As a Liberian, I intend to participate in the national reconstruction process, but to do this effectively, I want to understand how my skills, and the skills of young people in Liberia can be utilized in both the public and private sectors. According to statistics, out of 3.5 million Liberians, 53% of the population is youth (National Youth Policy of Liberia, 2005), and yet they are the least represented demographic in the various sectors of Liberian society.

The purpose of this research is to conduct an inquiry into the current role of youth in the reconstruction of Liberia. To achieve this objective, this research will adopt an investigative approach, identifying opportunities, suggesting possible strategies to enhance the involvement of the Liberian youth, and minimize exclusion. In this paper, the term ‘youth’ is defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 years. This definition is congruent with the Constitution of Liberia, and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. The term ‘reconstruction’ will be limited to the restoration of the state and state institutional programs. Youth Engagement Continuum framework will be utilized to analyze programs and data. The research will conclude with proposed action to improve youth access to opportunities at the local and national levels in Liberia.

Thus, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

Primary Question:

What opportunities are available for Liberian youth (15-35 years old) and how can these opportunities enhance the role of Liberian youth in the National Reconstruction Process?

Sub Questions:

- A. What are problems facing youth in Liberia?
- B. What specific programs have been developed to support youth in the public sector?
- C. What are some of the challenges faced by both the youth, and the government of Liberia that are affecting a cooperative relationship between the two?

Literature Review

Much research has been done on the impact war has on youth, and the difficulties they later face in adulthood. However, limited research has been done on youth participation during post-war reconstruction, especially in the African context.

Importance of Youth Participation

Rebuilding a state is an inclusive process. The role of adolescents in Africa has been limited in the past, but has greatly increased with the recognition that young voices are important. One could say this realization took a while due to cultural bias. Angela McIntyre revealed that in Africa, historically the role of youth has always been subordinate. Resisting authority is seen as deviant, especially in the political sphere. However, the introduction of Western ideology has changed the role of youth in Africa. Although these principles have

liberated youth in many countries, the unrest prevalent in certain parts of Africa have led to the marginalization of youth (McIntyre, 2004).

Africa is a continent of the young, and thus any study of society, politics and economics in the region must acknowledge the characteristics and importance of this group. Angela McIntyre emphasizes the importance of looking at children and youth as a constituency by looking at the participation of children, particularly in political life, in Africa.

Over the years, youth participation in Africa has been divided into two categories: *positive* and *negative*. Negative participation includes the use of children in armed conflict, forced marriages, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, etc., while their involvement in peace initiatives is categorized as positive participation. Positive participation can be defined as a situation where children think for themselves, express their views effectively, and interact in a positive way with other people. It means involving children in the decisions that affect their lives, the lives of their community, and the larger society in which they live.

In Africa and particularly Liberia, young people must be brought to the table to discuss national problems, and find comprehensive long term solutions. Understanding the historical and cultural context of youth can help youth advocates working today eliminate some of the obstacles they face in Africa and create a context for advocates that is more applicable to the youth they are serving. Understanding youth culture could help advocates create a better methodology for engaging youth, which could then lead to increasing youth participation in various sectors, and elevating their status in societies.

If education and leadership opportunities are given to African youth their participation in conflict will decrease. Mohammed Azzi in his article *Maghrebi Youth: Between Alienation and Integration (1990)* analyzed how the lack of social, political, and economic inclusion of Tunisia,

Morocco, and Algeria youth led to violence. Last year, the world witnessed Northern Africa become an environment for revolt as citizens, especially youth, rebelled against their leaders. According to Azzi, many young people felt society did not value their importance. Consequently, many youth turned to religious group, because it compensated for the exclusion they felt in their lives. It was a means of survival, but also an opportunity to ensure their voices were heard and skills utilized.

Looking at the revolts that took place, the actions of young people in these various countries were the results of years of oppression by their respective states, which chose to disempower youth. The countries mentioned above did not take the initiative to analyze the needs of their youth; instead they used force to restrain them from active participation. It is vital that the integration of youth is considered, especially in the political sphere. If efforts are not made to resolve the needs of youth, violence will continue on the streets of Africa. Note: Statistical evidence showing an increase in crime by youths would be best here.

Coping with Trauma

Many young Africans have witnessed or experienced direct and indirect violence. The psychological effects are unavoidable. Our minds are our greatest assets; once impaired we lack the ability to contribute to our society. Liberian youth are still devastated by fifteen years of civil war. For them to become active citizens, the trauma they have experienced has to be addressed.

One of the many issues persistent among African youth in post- conflict areas is the trauma of war. War causes a great psychological suffering to those who experience it. According to research conducted by Kasler, Dahan and Elias (2008), a variety of factors, including age, gender, and cultural beliefs, as well as proximity and the degree of violence observed, may affect

the extent and nature of the reactions of youth. In their study, they found that using social support programs to measure impact on post-traumatic stress disorder was too general to be useful for reform. However, it was confirmed that hope improves symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and plays a critical role in explaining and coping with the risk of it. This could have positive implications for educational policy as it emphasizes social support programs as a stress buffer.

An increasing number of children are exposed to the hostility of modern day war, and many have consequently developed complex psychological problems that are not adequately dealt with. According to Kasler, Dahan and Elias, children exposed to the trauma of war show high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, as do children exposed to continuous terror. People who are affected indirectly produce evidence that certain kinds of social services help develop resilience and personal growth. It is clear you cannot quantify certain programs' impact in areas of conflict, but the mere presence of a neutral organization and/or environment that allows individuals to express themselves makes an undeniable impact.

Individually or collectively, it is necessary to address trauma after war in order to stop citizens from reverting to the past. Galtung presents a framework as to how a society can collectively overcome post war trauma. The three R's, meaning Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Rehabilitation are antidotes for communities that have long histories of violence. To collectively heal, it is vital that all three R's are implemented. It is important to emphasize reconstruction is not an isolated process, but a holistic process complemented by reconciliation and resolution.

After a nation has witnessed a long period of violence, citizens are consciously and unconsciously traumatized. The violence they experienced directly or indirectly change the

manner in which they live. Hence, reconstruction strategies have to address the psychological, social, and economic needs of citizens after war. If citizens are traumatized psychologically, it hinders their ability to function. A *collective sorrow* approach to rehabilitation can be used by members of the society to recognize why they are traumatized. Cooperatively, they have to agree on the traumatic actions and actors that cause their sorrow, and eliminate visible structures that remind them of those actions. After this, they can begin the process of healing. Rehabilitation is a lifelong process that continuously has to be evaluated.

Rebuilding is important as it is a concrete and visible part of reconstruction. After violence, tangible changes assure individuals their communities are progressing. Rebuilding is a comprehensive process which involves the psychological, physical, and social aspects of renewal. It is not a process to be left to a specific group as it may result in reverting back to violence. The guarantees of reconciliation, reconstruction, and reintegration can be derived from a more holistic approach.

Reculturation is the *peace culture* approach in which society tries to promote a culture of peace rather than violence. Galtung emphasizes that society should focus on the young rather than the old, as it is an opportunity to cultivate a new generation towards sustainable peace. After a period of sustained violence, a culture of peace needs to be fostered.

Strategies for Inclusion

“Reconstruction cannot be possible without deconstruction of existing systems, utilizing a bottom up approach that includes participatory democracy” (Forje, 2008, pg. 223). To deconstruct and reconstruct three things are involved. First, individuals have to develop the conscious and become aware of their condition. Second, the culture of the politics which goes

beyond the personal must be strengthened. Citizens have to increase their sense of collectiveness, and responsibility sharing, including equitable distribution of the nation's wealth. Thirdly, worldwide consciousness among citizens should be fostered, in order to motivate individual perspectives, and actions in a world that is increasingly globalised. This means governments need to go through the process of reconstruction, and realize the importance of including the marginalized.

In post-conflict countries, it is essential that governments establish a system that allows the voice of various parties to be heard. Inclusiveness is important when a state is being rebuilt. Forje posited that presently there is a need for new interventions that can restore the peace, security, and confidence to the suffering silent majority (Forje, 2008). New interventions are only possible when those in power actively listen to the voiceless. Africans need to take charge of reconstruction from a standpoint of collectivity and inclusion. Forje noted, "The politics of inclusion has yet to penetrate the body of African politics and without inclusion there is no guarantee of a culture of tolerant consensus, or one which promotes a culture of self-sustained development" (Forje, 2008, pg 223).

To implement new strategies, there have to be visionaries willing to advocate. VeneKlasen and Miller (2007) give an in-depth look at different policies, and exercises that advocates can use to create dialogues around issues pertaining to their constituents, discussing different power structures, and setbacks when advocating from the grassroots to the international level.

Different strategies are needed for different advocacy campaigns. There are specific methods to use for maximum efficacy. The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

(SWOT) method is a tool that can be used to map out internal and external forces that could help or hinder a campaign. It is a method that can be used by advocates to identify who to engage in their campaigns, and who should be excluded. It is a tactic to influence international policies from the local level by knowing the players. To avoid mistakes, advocates need to understand how to analyze, implement, and carry out advocacy work; this way they are able to influence their constituents, stakeholders, and the overall structure they are trying to change. Most of all, due to the importance of community involvement, advocates must enable members to relate and support the campaign from the beginning to the end.

When organizing campaigns, understanding the system as well as the people is crucial. Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO, 2000) identifies three youth organizing models: youth led organizations, youth participation in adult led organization, and intergenerational organizations. Youth- led organizations are administered by adults, but power is shared. Youth and adults have responsibilities in which youth take on the central roles, and adults are assistants. Youth participation in an adult-led organization enables youth to acquire skills from adults. They play the role of assisting and from time to time are given opportunities to lead. In intergenerational organization, the age range differs and responsibility is shared. Youth and adults have interchanging roles and responsibilities. The FCYO approach places youth in control of budget decisions, board governance, and campaign decision making (Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, 2000).

Collective action involving the affected population as well as those maintaining the status quo optimizes change. Recognizing that young people are resources, a platform can be created for young people to cope with multiple challenges they face and to contribute to society in a

supportive environment (Ikemenjima, 2008). There are several models which mitigate how youth can organize and engage their society, but the FYCO model focuses on systematic change. The model is designed to get youth involved in organizing to fight a problem, increasing their engagement, and campaigning which concludes in successfully changing the system.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM



(Created by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, 2000)

In this research, understanding youth and allocating resources for them is essential to getting them active. Positive Youth Development (PYD) consists of several development frameworks that focus on the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of young people. One of the PYD frameworks developed by the Search Institute is 'The 40 Developmental Assets'. The theory suggests youth must have a mixture of internal and external assets to become caring, responsible adults. The assets refer to the relationships, opportunities and personal qualities that young people need to avoid risks and thrive.

CHARACTERISTIC OF EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ASSETS

External Assets (relationships and opportunities)	Internal Assets (personal qualities)
Support Empowerment Boundaries and expectations Constructive use of time	Commitment to learning Positive values Social competencies Positive identity

Essential to this theory is the dependence of external assets on internal assets. Youth need a positive balance of these assets to excel, which many in post conflict nations lack.

Research Design

Overall Approach and Rationale

An integrative approach consisting of theories and concepts from the field of environmental psychology, collaborative planning, sustainable development, conflict transformation, and youth studies was used to guide the implementation and analysis of the research. Qualitative research methods were utilized to acquire information from more than one source, through interviews, surveys, and literary reviews. These methods allowed me to explore the opportunities available to youth. I interviewed youth activists, conducted group surveys, and acquired information from public servants on current strategies being used to involve youth in the national reconstruction process.

Site or Population Selection and Sampling Strategies

Participants from Monrovia were selected for several reasons. The first reason is Monrovia's diverse community' whose population density is influenced by increasingly rural-urban migration and suffers from the mass displacement of citizens who left rural settings in search of refuge, opportunities and basic social services. The second reason is that most youth

organizations are based in Monrovia, thus creating greater accessibility. Formal interviews were selective because the intended targets were individuals mobilizing youth, and youth who are currently working with an entity that is involved in the reconstruction process. These are individuals in the position to impact reforms at the local, national, and international levels for youth in Liberia. Formal interviews were specifically geared towards this group as they were the primary resource in capturing information on the current opportunities available for youth. Youth 18-35 years of age were surveyed in order to capture views from all walks of life regarding the subject matter. Surveys were conducted in schools, youth hangouts, and on the streets of various neighborhoods.

Data Gathering Procedures

Participants included a group of twenty nine students from high school, five youth executive directors, five public servants, and ten randomly selected youth. To ensure that perspectives of different youths were captured, neglected neighborhoods were targeted. All participants were over the age of eighteen.

Formal interviews consisted of thirteen participants, who were either executive directors or public servants. Interview questions were open ended; at the beginning of each interview participants were asked about their background and experience working with youth. Before conducting an interview, participants were given a consent form which explained the purpose of the research. A survey with close ended questions was given to a group of twenty three junior high school students, and thirteen randomly selected youth. In addition, literature on youth participation, post war reconstruction and the trauma of war were reviewed.

Data Analysis Procedures

Transcriptions were taken for each interview. Interviewees were categorized in the following groups: (1) youth activists, (2) students, and (3) public servants.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were chosen because they were: a) Liberian youth, b) youth activist, or c) policy makers. Participants were told their honesty was important and whatever information they disclosed was not going to be used to violate their anonymity. The same was done for the survey, except the contents of the consent forms were explained orally. Due to the fact that I did not know the participants personally; I had to tell them why I chose to do the research, and what I intended to do with the research. After each interview, participants were told they could request a copy of my research if they wished.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

This research experienced several limitations. It could not capture the views and opinions of some marginalized youth especially the illiterate, disabled, rural dwellers, and the public sector. Scarcity of pre-war and post war materials due to the massive destruction, and the lack of a strong culture of record keeping impeded this research. I failed to acknowledge gender differences during the research, which is vital when trying to understand the problems of a specific group of people. It did not target the opinions and views of international organizations that had and continue to work as partners in Liberia's reconstruction. These limitations will foster a perception largely influenced by the educated and probably privileged youth.

Findings

After reviewing each transcription from the interviews and surveys, major themes emerged. Given my research question and sub questions I categorized the data into themes that

emerged frequently to help me answer my research questions. Themes that emerged were (1) inclusion of youth in the reconstruction process, (2) programs available to enhance youth involvement nationally, and (3) public and private sector responsibility to youth. Emerging themes from the surveys were: (1) problems facing youth, (2) participants awareness of youth programs, and (3) perception of the public sector's relationship with youth.

Definition Statements of Reconstruction and Youth Involvement

Reconstruction is defined as a bottom up approach, in which all parties affected by the conflict understand the root causes of the conflict, participate in developing a shared vision of the future, are willing to manage the high expectations and low capacity of the state to deliver the “peace dividends,” and promote holistic and sustainable development practices that meet the needs of the communities (Barakat, 2005). According to an interviewee, reconstruction in Liberia is viewed by many as the responsibility of the state, and not a joint venture between citizens and institutions. However, he believes that reconstruction should be collaboration between the private and public sectors in which both construct a national plan that involves all. Thus, reconstruction is a partnership between the state and citizens to collectively work together after conflict, to address the psychological, social, and economic needs of all parties by creating a national development plan which reflects the needs of all parties.

Youth involvement is a process in which young people are actively engaged in their respective communities and positively contribute to the social, political, and economic spheres to ensure sustained growth.

What are problems facing youth in Liberia?

During the 60's and 70's Liberia was known as the utopia of West Africa, described by elders as *Normal Days*, a period before mass political agitation for social and political change in

Liberia. Normal days were tarnished after the rice riot of 1979 took place. The rice riot began when the national government at the time planned to increase the price of rice from about \$20 to \$30 at a time when an average civil servants pay checks were \$50. This period marked a fundamental departure from how political dissent was practiced and/or articulated. Underneath the glitz and glamour of the 60's and 70's, political, economic, and ethnic disparities were uncovered. Young people began to reveal their desire for inclusion and cried out for systematic change. The Liberian National Student Union played a major role in gathering citizens to protest against the rising price of rice (Liberia staple food). The Liberian National Student Union (LINSU) was one of the few organizations that stood up politically for the youth in Liberia by partaking in protests against unjust policies, educating youth about their constitutional rights, and advocating for academic freedom and social justice. The rice riots of 1979 were one of the most significant political developments in the history of Liberia. After the rice riots, it was logical to predict an alarming desire for political freedom which many citizens sought, giving rise to the military coup in April 1980, and subsequently the civil war which spanned a decade, ending in 2003.

The impact of the civil war can be seen in the lack of infrastructure, economic disparities, distorted social norms, and the mass displacement and exodus of Liberians around the world. The civil war left many youth bitter, but has not hindered their motivation to contribute to the rebuilding/reconstruction of Liberia. Fortunately for Liberians, peace has been sustained over the last six years. As Liberians set out to rebuild their lives, they took precautionary steps not to repeat the mistakes of the past. These efforts reinforced their commitment to work towards sustained peace.

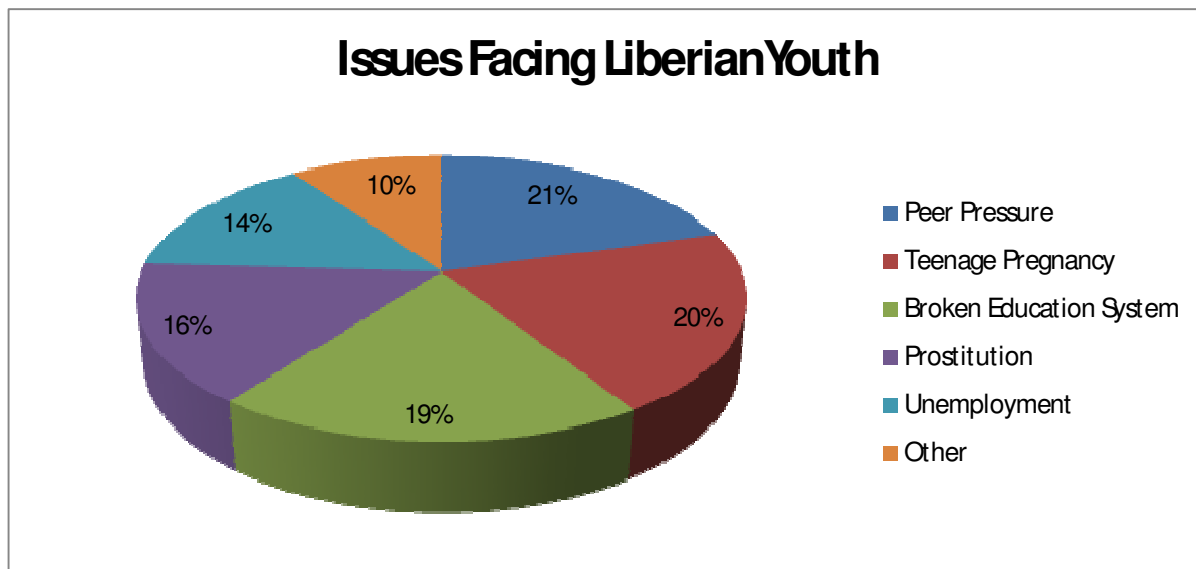
One of the goals of reconstruction is to eliminate social exclusion (Galtung, 1996), because social exclusion is one of the reasons why violence escalates. Although youth were not the primary agents mitigating the civil war in Liberia, their participation in the war as victims makes them essential to the process of reconstruction. The concept of creating a space for youth to articulate and engage with adults is relatively new in Liberia. Liberian youth are seen as subordinate to older family members, excluded from the decision making processes in their families and the national level. The young people of Liberia today have suffered the brutalities of the war, and acted as principal instigators of the conflict in some cases. It is imperative that the cycle of violence be broken. These issues cannot be eradicated instantly with limited resources, and broken systems that currently fail to support initiatives which address youth problems from the core.

Since the civil war, youth movements in Liberia have been static. The lives of Liberian youth have been destroyed by years of war, and they are confronting psychological, social, and economic problems, due to their lengthy exposure to conflict. Youth in post conflict communities lack the infrastructure to engage in productive activities, there has been a breakdown of social norms and values, as well as health and educational needs (Ikemenjima, 2008). Before the civil war, it was the norm for citizens to take a child roaming the streets into their homes to make sure the needs of the child were met. Due to experiences during the war, citizens are more cautious about helping others. Homeless and unemployed youth roam the streets of Liberia daily with no place to go. It is estimated that over three thousand children roam the streets of Monrovia, many lacking education, health care, parental guidance, and other support (streetkidsnews.com).

Factors Influencing Youth Involvement

After conflict, reconstruction will not be successful until all parties affected by the conflict get involved. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the people involved in the situation, and what their needs are to ensure their involvement.

The chart below displays the top five problems facing Liberian youth after compiling survey results. Broken education system is in the top 5.



Many participants pointed out the Liberian education system is not equipped to prepare students for success. Public schools are the least equipped schools in Liberia. Many lack resources such as libraries, computers, etc. Students are expected to learn from unqualified teachers who were taught through the same broken education system. Students lack equipment to conduct experiments that refute or support theories they learn in the classroom. A biology student from Cuttingtong University located in Bong County, Liberia expresses her frustration.

“He told me to give facts for one of my homework. Where am I supposed to get facts when the books I have is dated from 1900, and I never had since school started. So I told him to go and find his facts and he said I am rude” (Interview, 2011).

This student is expressing the frustration many feel around the country, due to the lack of qualified teachers, resources, and financial support to attend school. The broken education system has led to unqualified employment in Liberians. A study conducted in 2009 by The International Labor Organization for the government of Liberia showed that two thirds of employed Liberians have a primary education or less. Gender inequalities exist in the education system. The study revealed, women have at most primary education, whereas a larger percentage of men were able to attain a secondary or higher education.

Teenage pregnancy is prevalent in Liberia. One interviewee said, “We have babies having babies around here” (Interview, 2011). Young women are not taking measures to prevent pregnancy, as they lack education, have low self esteem, and/ or they believe they are immune to pregnancy. Many young girls cannot afford education due to the lack of financial support. This results in turning to prostitution or dating older men for financial assistance. In a private conversation with an elder, he revealed some older Liberian men do not believe in contraceptives, as it makes sex less enjoyable. Therefore, many young girls find themselves in relationships with older men, and do not have the power to say no. They have to endure, and live with the consequences. In some cases, they die as they try to abort the pregnancy, or catch deadly sexually transmitted diseases.

Surprisingly, many youth perceive peer pressure as one of the major problems facing Liberian youth. As mentioned in the literature review, young people need to feel valued and accepted by society. If they do not feel they belong, they tend to find acceptance in other places. Namely, these groups have included gangs, religious groups, cultural groups, clubs, etc. According to Tate and Copas, peer pressure is “like energy, cannot be created or destroyed” (Tate and Copas, 2010). Hence, peer pressure can have a negative or positive impact depending on the individual, or the source of the pressure. Unfortunately, for many Liberian youth their peers are pressuring them into destructive behaviors. The usage of drugs in Liberia has escalated over the last six years among youth, a new phenomenon in the country (Interview, 2011).

Due to the prolonged political instability that existed in Liberia, children were unable to attend school on a regular basis. Therefore, many do not have the skills and knowledge needed to compete on the national or global level for jobs today. An environment which lacks the resources to deal with these problems is prone to have youth participating in two ways. They either rebel against the system in which they feel limited by advocating for change, or they become discouraged rebels who engage in self destructive or deviant behaviors against those unable to protect themselves. Teen pregnancy, prostitution, and drug use have always been a problem but increased during the war, and the implications have been devastating. Parents would rather send their children to work than to school, given the low availability of jobs. The mentality of fighting to stay alive today and not worrying about the future was developed as a survival response to the war. Unfortunately, this mentality is still persistent among many after the conflict.

What specific programs have been developed to support youth in the public sector?

Some youth in Liberia are cultivating ways to change a system that has offered them limited resources, and excluded them for so long. In the national reconstruction plan for Liberia several activities have been outlined to involve youth. The Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY) was created as an autonomous organization with the responsibility of organizing, and coordinating activities for Liberian youth. FLY's goal is to strengthen youth participation in policy implementation, actively promote youth rights, advocate for inclusion in decision making, and ensure youth commitment to the following: information sharing, transparency, accountability, value-based leadership, and decentralization of youth activities (federationforliberianyouth.org). FLY's focus is to implement the Nation Youth Policy Act (NYP) nationwide. The NYP was drafted in partnership with local CSOs and NGOs as a framework that could be utilized by all entities associated with youth in Liberia to actively represent their interests. However, the NYP was never enacted and is currently being reevaluated.

FLY's other projects include channeling youth towards active advocacy in Liberia. Youth networks are established in different parts of the country by an elected county youth secretariat. To sustain the program they compliment the secretariat program with capacity building. The youth secretariat is the structure through which the implementation of the National Youth Policy Action plan will be coordinated and supervised at county levels. It is an opportunity for young people in various regions of Liberia to acquire practical leadership skills while remaining in their respective regions. The program hopes participants will obtain practical skills that allow them to understand the workings of the national government, a vital skill for citizens, in order to analyze the areas in which the government lacks accountability.

In accordance with the Youth Engagement Continuum, FLY is creating programs that are engaging youth collectively and helping them develop practical leadership skills. The programs enable youth from different tribes to work together as a team. Thus, the issue of ethnic animosity is being addressed and minimized. Programs on democracy address the exploitation and alienation of youth that took place in the past. They give youth the tools to feel powerful, and participate directly in the reconstruction process on a smaller scale, and encourage them to be political active.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports is a pinnacle entity for youth driven initiatives in Liberia. As part of the reconstruction plan the Ministry has implemented several projects with the help of international entities such as the United Nation (UN) and World Bank (WB). The creation of the Technical Vocational Education Training (TVET) was created to increase the technical capacity of Liberian youth. The need for human resources in Liberia is at its all time low; due to fact skilled workers are leaving Liberia and migrating to developed countries, in which they invest their skills and knowledge, because they are compensated at a higher rate. The majority of young people in Liberia that are of the minimum working age have lived half of their life in conflict, which has hindered their ability to acquire work skills formally and informally.

“It is a double edge sword. Youth are not in school, but they don’t have skills to work. So, all is left for them is to engage in deviant behavior,” said a youth activist (Interview, 2011). The TVET program was established under a military decree issued by a military government at which time the legislature was suspended, it was called PRC Decree No. 56. A commission was created to regulate the functions of TVET, which include ensuring quality in delivery, equal access to TVET, and formulating national policy for skills development across the spectrum of informal/formal education, and supervising the activities of the private and public sector TVET

providers. The commission is supervised by a board consisting of twelve entities. Eight of those entities represent the public sector, one represents the private sector, and three are civil society representatives. There is no youth entity on the board. It is funded under the national budget. According to an employee at the Ministry of Youth and Sport the program is trying to meet its goals, but due to lack of funding it is diminishing.

Another program run by the ministry is the Youth on the Job Training Program (YJTP), supported through United States Aid Agency (USAID) and the WB. It is a 9 to 18 months internship that places students under mentors who work in different sectors of the job market. Students choose their area of interest, which could be anything from carpentry to medicine. At the end of the program they are certified, and in some cases, hired by their mentors.

“Volunteer eh? I need money,” (Interview, 2011) a youth said when volunteering was suggested to her. The concept of volunteering is fairly new to Liberians. Culturally, Liberians are caring and giving, but it’s limited to individuals they affiliate with. Many do not see the benefits of allocating free time to institutions, when they will not be compensated. Culturally it has been taught that one only works to get paid, be it monetarily or otherwise. To reculturate the perception of giving only when it is beneficial to the giver, the ministry has started a National Youth Volunteering Service Program (NYVSP). The program places high school and universities students in different regions of the country to work for a period of time, and upon completion of the program they are given a stipend. Apart from encouraging the young people to volunteer, it is a means for them to consider living elsewhere in country. Civically engaging youth in different communities, around the country allows them to gain firsthand knowledge about the societal problems around the country. As mentioned previously, Monrovia is over-populated, while counties on the outskirts are deserted. If more young people go to the different

counties, it is an opportunity for development to extend outside the capital city and increase the cultural knowledge of participants.

During several interviews, complaints were made regarding the lack of funding for youth programs. According to a staff at the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the programs they implement are very successful, but due to financial restraints, they are unable to cater to more youth.

Liberia's physical environment is essential to our growth, and the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) began an initiative to make sure youth know the importance of maintaining the environment. MCC is charged with the responsibility of making sure the affairs of Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia is properly managed. MCC designated the first Saturday of every month as national clean up day. They contacted youth organizations to involve them in the initiative, and "create consciousness among the young about the space we share" said an interviewee. Youth are encouraged to organize, clean up their communities, and to stop littering.

If peace is to become sustainable, the challenge for civil society is to assist with the psychological and spiritual healing (Faltas, 2005). Radio programs have been a means for youth to articulate their opinions regarding national issues. Search for Common Ground (SFCG) is an international organization that uses media as a medium for conflict transformation. It does not distinguish between youth based on their past involvement in the conflict. In many conflict areas, youth who have been directly involved in the conflict are reprimanded by society afterwards. Programs are designed in accordance with the needs and wants of the environment, and locals lead the development of the various programs. Youth are recruited based on recommendations and advertisements. The selection process is tedious, as the goal is to make the programs accessible to all. The reasoning behind the selective process is to find and work with motivated

youth who are willing to work independently. The SFCG tries to create programs solely constructed by youth, with little to no involvement from adults.

In Liberia, numerous radio programs have been created; two well-known programs are *Let's Learn Together* and *The Talking Drum Studio*. SFCG programs are radio-based and geared toward healing and closure. *The Talking Drum Studio* has several programs in different formats on problem solving, advocacy, politics, etc. Each program has a theme pertaining to forgiveness and resolving conflict constructively, ensuring the results agreed upon benefit all parties involved. Through simulations performed by youth, they address some of the root causes of the war. The show demonstrates alternative ways to address conflict, and the audience has an opportunity to call in at the end of the program to discuss. SFCG intentionally creates a series that deals with several issues: addressing ethnic differences, the marginalization of women, the lack of education, and the treatment of child soldiers in the community. Youth participating in the program are encouraged to write scripts that reflect what is going on around them on a daily basis. A youth participant said he believes that the program has helped him and his friends understand how to deal with conflict effectively.

Another popular radio program funded by Population Services International (PSI) and United Nations Radio (UN) called *Let's Talk about Sex* is run by youth commentators, who discuss different aspects of sex and how it is effecting youth. Talking about sex is taboo in Liberia, especially among youth, thus the show was created to clarify myths demoralizing sex. They invite experts to talk about the issue of the day. Youth and adults are given the opportunity to call the show, and get advice or voice their opinions. After a few debates, commentators offer solutions as to how they think the problems discussed can be ratified.

Results from the survey conducted show the Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) was the most well known youth organization. Over the years, the YMCA engaged in training young men and women for national leadership. Through its national older boy's conference, young people traveled around Liberia and were trained to understand the diversity of their country. The model United Nations General Assembly enabled young people to test their capacity through debates by representing various countries around the world in a mock debate session modeled after the UN General Assembly, and its high school and junior high schools program brought young people together into various activities. These programs have all diminished due to lack of funding and lack of vision to continue. Currently, the organization has partnerships with several government entities as well as conducting year round programs that uses sports to empower youth.

These programs offered through different entities are engaging youth physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally, however limited they are.

Importance of Creating a Space for Liberian Youth

Statistics have shown that 53% of the population of Liberia is composed of young people under 20 (National Youth Policy). This youthful population needs to be acknowledged; if youth involvement is not augmented in the reconstruction process, it is an error Liberia eventually will have to contend with.

Over the last five years 16 billion dollars worth of rubber concession agreements have been signed by the Liberian government (interview transcripts) and 60 percent of the population does not qualify to work in the rubber industry. Companies have resulted to recruiting internationally. Once Liberia starts looking at building young people's capacity, in the next twenty years there will not be a need to recruit internationally. A strategy needs to be put in place

to train and develop local skills that will target these jobs. This will reduce the demand for external labor.

If more opportunities are created for youth to participate in the reconstruction process, society will reap the benefits of their actions. The youth of Liberia live in an environment in which they have not received the necessary external and internal assets to become functioning members of their society. Given responsibilities, they will be encouraged to demonstrate their capacity to function as assets to the community. Youth involvement in community structures would redirect public discourse to ensure their needs are incorporated into a broader community agenda. In turn, public leaders and community members would become more aware and conscious of youth issues. The collective power of youth would be elevated, and they would be able to influence the manner in which youth rights are analyzed in society. Adults have negative perceptions of youth; however, young people's power to generate positive change should not be underestimated. In a study conducted by Felice and Wisler, youth in post conflict counties become leading, successful advocates for peace under supportive structures (Felice and Wisler, 2007).

When youth feel they are part of a society, they feel ownership towards their environment; therefore they are deterred from deviant and destructive behaviors that affect others. Ideally their actions would result in social change at the local and national level.

What are some of the challenges faced by both the youth, and the government of Liberia that are affecting a cooperative relationship between the two?

For years, youth advocates have confronted the issue contextualizing their programs for youth in post-conflict areas. According to Horeilli, the mechanism for intergenerational equality in local and regional development is participation (Horeilli, 2001). There are challenges, but the Liberian society cannot stop engaging youth. In post-conflict countries, marginalized groups are

the most traumatized, because they are normally the least educated, and they lack resources to maintain good living conditions.

The relationship between the youth of Liberia and adults in positions of power needs to be transformed into *right relationships* (Schirch, 2004). The right relationship components include; healing traumas, transforming conflict, and doing justice. In the research survey youth were asked to rate the national government's relationship with youth on a scale of 1 to 10, one being very bad and ten being great: 5 was the highest frequently rated number. It is clear that participants felt the relationship between youth, and the Liberian national government was neither good nor bad. To implement *right relationships*, Liberians must consider what one of the interviewee refers to as the *New Youth*, youth born out of war, tested by years of violence and state criminalization.

Adults in positions of power are hesitant to transfer their skills to the young. A director said, "Young people today just don't want to learn" (Interview, 2011). Unfortunately, young people are bombarded with negative comments like these, making them feel unworthy. The government and CSOs need to start initiatives in different regions of Liberia, where the primary focus is rebuilding right relationships. Experts can be brought into the country to train Liberians, in the field of social work, psychology and community organizing using the county development fund. The county development fund was created by the government of Liberia, supported through concessional agreements with international companies working within the counties. Liberians who attain certification can train others ensuring the practice is continued. The intended result is to have adults at all levels of society accept young Liberians as assets to the country.

Discussion

What opportunities are available for Liberian youth (15-35 years old) and how can these opportunities enhance the role of Liberian youth in the National Reconstruction Process?

In accordance with results from the surveys and interviews, building capacity through educational development is an integral part of facilitating the involvement of youth. Attainment of education, formal or informal is a necessity for Liberian youth, as it's a means for them to compete nationally, and internationally, in the job market. Free public education is available for students in preschool through high school; however, as mentioned earlier, the public school system is not equipped to prepare students for success. The Liberian government has been on the path of re-evaluating its education policies and practices. Yet, there are still persisting problems. The government needs to stop building schools and focus on restructuring the current schools. Majority of the new schools built over the last five years are deserted, due to their locations, and lack teachers. More money needs to be allocated for rebuilding current school structures. First, the government must encourage more students to go to the recently established Teachers College, by providing them with incentives, such as free tuition, and a bonus during teaching years based on performance. Second, it must renovate existing school buildings, ensuring every public school has an established library. Third, it must implement a policy that all school aged children attend school. If a student is found on the streets during school hours without a valid reason, they should be arrested and their parents reprimanded.

Alternative schools and programs should be created for youth who have surpassed the school age due to the war. Special curriculum could be developed to allow students to build their technical skills, while simultaneously easing them back into the formal education system if they

choose. The TVET and YTJP programs can be expanded to reflect these changes, as both programs already have the basis for technical training.

Policies should be created to reflect the Convention on Child Rights, and the African Youth Charter.

The Convention on Child Rights states in

- Article 1-Non discrimination between children
- Article 3- The best interests of the child should be consider in decisions by the state
- Article 6- The right to survival and development
- Article 12- The lives of the child should be taken seriously in judicial and administrative procedures

The African Youth Charter states in...

- Article 10- Every young person shall have the right to social, economic, political and cultural development with due regard to their freedom and identity. The State should encourage youth organizations to lead youth programs and to ensure the exercise of the right to development.
- Article 11- Every young person shall have the right to participate in all spheres of society and the state shall guarantee the participation of youth in parliament and other decision making bodies in accordance with the prescribed laws. Include youth representatives as part of delegations to ordinary sessions and other relevant meetings to broaden channels of communication and enhance the discussion of youth related issues.
- Article 12- Every state parties shall develop a comprehensive and coherent national youth policy and have laws to ensure implementation financially.

Policies should be created which demand all government institutions have at least one youth employed in every department based on merit, not personal affiliation. It is essential that structural change include young people. Replicating the old structures can only lead to old problems. It is necessary that Liberian youth understand how institutions function, so they are equipped to make informed decisions as to what needs to be changed for the betterment of the country.

A national task force on youth should be established to elevate the youth crisis to the national agenda for consideration. This national task force must ensure that all youth organizations and youth programs should be coordinated. The task force must be headed by a young person appointed by youth who is respected nationally. When the Liberian society starts to perceive young Liberians as partners in development, by building youth capacity, and ratified policies to include youth, it is then youth of Liberia will excel.

Conclusion

We live in an interconnected world; therefore we cannot analyze problems of individuals or groups individually, as it limits our ability to resolve the problem holistically. Liberia has several programs in the private and public sectors available to youth, yet the program's financial struggles limit their ability to cater to massive youth in need of help. Until policies are institutionalized which address the barriers of youth involvement in the reconstruction of Liberia, the status quo will prevail. The Ministry of Youth and Sports and FLY need to generate more advocacy work around the NYP, and eliminate the problems that were identified with the NYP during its first review.

Post-war reconstruction is vital, because actions taken by leaders can either revert the country to a state of conflict or sustain psychological, social, and economic growth of its citizens.

Alperovitz said “sustainability over time requires that the culture of community be institutionally based, which means it must be embodied in structures that generate, reinforce, sustain and nurture it” (Alperovitz, 1996, pg 57). Integrating youth-led programs and initiatives into the reconstruction plan of Liberia will diminish the possibility of reverting back to the conflict, as youth will be less inclined to destroy structures they feel ownership of.

Galtung said, "Young people are searching for new ideas and are open to new challenges while adults have already formed their dogmatic discourses. I have seen this hundreds of times in my life” (Galtung, pg.129). During peace-building processes, young people should be at the forefront of development, as they are willing to let go of the past, and adapt to the future. Youth activists mentioned in their interviews that young people should be praised for their willingness to listen and critically assess feedback, skills many adults lack. Young Liberians inherited and are living with the ramifications of Liberia’s civil war, something they had no control over, but they are willing to move on if Liberian society becomes more receptive to them.

Practical Applicability

The framework and models discussed can be used in strategic organizing to mobilize youth, be it in Liberia or elsewhere. The definitions of reconstruction and youth involvement can be utilized to create better programs to increase youth involvement. The data collected reveal that youth are aware of what is inhibiting them, and know what needs to be changed to eliminate these obstacles. There is a famous saying that states “speak and you shall be spoken to”, but it is useless to speak when no one is listening. Young people know what to do but, what they need is support. Given Liberia’s diverse youth population with varying needs, educational development and psychosocial services might not be useful to all.

Public/Private Sector

It is important that public and private sectors work together to implement the suggestions above, as it will eliminate creating redundant programs and wasting resources. Given the financial restraints of the government, the private sector can help facilitate funding to better strengthen youth-led programs implemented by the government.

Recommendations for Further Research

As stated in my literature review, research that contextualizes African youth experience in post-war reconstruction is needed.

- What development strategies were used to construct a Liberian national development plan and the role of the international community? Every country after war needs assistance and usually international actors are willing to aid. However, nothing is for free. It is necessary to see how the national reconstruction plan was rationalized in order to understand why certain groups are receiving more funding for programs, while others are neglected.
- What are practical ways youth can facilitate their involvement?
- It is true that there is a need for youth involvement, but sole responsibility cannot be put on adults to facilitate such involvement. Strategies that youth can use to recognize when they are not participating are needed.

The world is changing and the dynamics of leadership has changed over the years. Young people are searching for identity in political leadership around the world. Their participation and energy has been directed towards promoting and supporting leaderships that identify with their interests whatever they might be. The world and Liberia must recognize this fact and respond.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

This interview is being conducted by Marit Woods, a current student at The School for International Training, for her capstone research. The purpose of the research is to explore the role youth can play in reconstructing Liberia. Participation in the study will involve a 20-30 minute interview.

Individual names will not be included in the report. The interview will be audiotape if you are willing. The audiotape and the interview notes will be destroyed within one year of the completion of the project. You can refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you. Essentially your participation poses no risks to you.

If you have questions about the project, you may contact (Marit Woods) at (05-587-368).

Do you wish to participate? Please initial here _____ if you agree to the audio taping of the interview. You are free to stop the audio taping at any time during the interview.

By your signature below, you agree to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form.

Participant Signature Date

Interviewer Signature Date

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. In your opinion what are some problems facing youths in Liberia today?
2. How do you think these problems can be ratified?
3. Are you aware of programs in the country gear towards mobilizing youths? If so, what are their focuses?
4. Analyzing the current government and their various policies and programs, do you think the Liberian youths are being included/ excluded from the reconstruction process in Liberia? If included/excluded please explain how.
5. How can youth involvement in the process of reconstruction be augmented by the Liberia government?
6. War has impacted youth in Liberia immensely, how do you think the private and public sectors of society can work collectively with youths to ensure they become productive citizens of tomorrow? Explain in detail.
7. Why should the government of Liberia/society invest in youths?

Appendix C: Survey Questions

Survey: (Circle One)

How old are you

18-25

25-35

What is your current status?

Married

Single

Divorce

What level of education have you completed?

Elementary

Junior high

High school

University

Rate the Liberian government relationship with youths (**1=very bad to 10= Great**).

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Are you aware of the Liberian national youth policy?

Yes

No

Name one youth organization in Liberia.

Name three issues facing Liberian youth today.

Name two things that the government of Liberian is doing for youth.