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# ANALYZING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPACT IN URBAN AND RURAL LIBERIA

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**ANALYZING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMS AND THEIR IMPACT IN URBAN AND RURAL LIBERIA**


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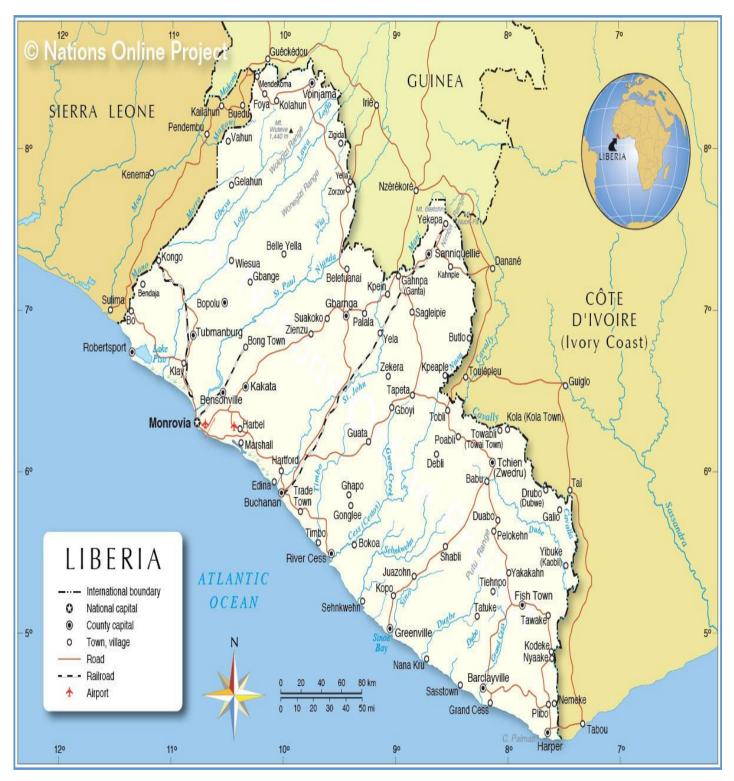**Student Name**: <u>Bartime Abel Learwellie</u>

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**Map for Liberia**



Nations Online. (2021). Liberia Map

## Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ADF-V: | African Development Forum |
| CHA: | Community Health Assistant |
| DDRR: | Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration |
| EPAG: | Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women |
| FGD: | Focus Group Discussions |
| ICT: | Information and Communication Technology |
| IRC: | International Rescue Committee |
| KII: | Key Informant Interviews |
| L.A.C.E.S.: | Life and Change Experienced Through Sport |
| LAMCO: | Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company |
| LINSU: | Liberia National Students Union |
| LMC: | Liberia Mining Company |
| MDA: | Mineral Development Agreement |
| NGO: | Non-Governmental Organization |
| OECD: | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PYD: | Positive Youth Development |
| STDs: | Sexually Transmitted Diseases |
| STIs: | Sexually Transmitted Infections |
| TAT: | Tumutu Agriculture Training |
| TVET: | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UMCOR: | United Methodist Committee on Relief |
| UNDP: | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNDESA: | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| UNICEF: | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| USAID: | United States Agency for International Development |
| UNMIL: | United Nations Mission in Liberia |
| YMCA: | Young Men's Christian Association |

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I am deeply grateful to all those who have supported and contributed to the completion of this study. First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to my family for their unwavering support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this journey. Your patience for my absence and family time has been a constant source of strength.

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Thank you all for your invaluable contributions and support.

**Positionality Statement of the Study**

In conducting this study, I recognize the importance of reflexivity and transparency in my role as the researcher. I bring a unique perspective to this research as the Executive Director of Camp for Peace, an organization deeply involved in youth empowerment and development in Liberia. My professional position and reputation in the country have provided me with extensive experience and access to networks for data collection, as well as insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Liberian youth.

However, my journey to this role has not been straightforward. I, too, have experienced the vulnerabilities and struggles of youth in Liberia, navigating socio-economic hardships and seeking opportunities to build the better future I now have. This dual perspective, both as a former vulnerable youth and now as a leader in youth development, enables me to understand deeply the issues at hand. Yet, it is crucial to approach this study with an open mind, with the aim of gathering fresh and authentic insights from the field, rather than relying solely on my personal experiences and preconceived notions. My position at Camp for Peace and my broader reputation could influence participants' responses. They might feel compelled to provide answers they believe I want to hear, rather than their genuine experiences and opinions. To mitigate this, I took several steps to ensure that the data collected was as unbiased and accurate as possible. During the recruitment and data collection processes, I emphasized the importance of honest and open communication.  I emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and that all opinions and experiences were valuable. This approach encouraged participants to speak freely without the fear of being judged or criticized. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that their identities would be protected. This was intended to create a safe space where they felt comfortable sharing their true perspectives.

Furthermore, I recruited a team of trained recorders to help me conduct focus group discussions and key informant interviews. These facilitators were briefed on maintaining neutrality and the importance of minimizing the impact of their presence on the participants' responses. My goal was to reduce the impact of any single researcher's bias, including my own.

Throughout the study, I maintained a reflective journal to document my thoughts, feelings, and potential biases. This practice helped me remain aware of how my background and experiences might shape my interpretation of the data. By constantly engaging in reflexivity, I aimed to provide a balanced and comprehensive analysis that genuinely reflects the voices of the participants.

My positionality as a researcher with both personal and professional stakes in the study brings strengths and challenges to this research. By acknowledging and addressing these factors, I aimed to conduct a study that is both credible and insightful, contributing meaningfully to the discourse on youth empowerment in Liberia.

**Abstract**

This study analyzes youth empowerment programs and their impact in urban and rural Liberia. It is motivated by the need to address the socio-economic challenges faced by young people in these settings. The research aims to understand how these programs can be tailored to suit diverse geographical contexts, thereby maximizing their effectiveness and relevance. Liberia's socio-economic landscape, significantly shaped by the civil war and the Ebola crisis, presents distinct challenges for youth empowerment. High unemployment, inadequate educational access, and limited social services are pressing issues for the country's youth. There is a noticeable gap in understanding how the implementation and effectiveness of youth empowerment programs vary between urban and rural contexts.

A qualitative research design was employed, involving four focus group discussions (FGDs) and six key informant interviews (KIIs). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods, ensuring diverse representation from individual community members and youth empowerment officials or NGO workers who have had direct experience participating in and implementing youth empowerment programs respectively. The data collected were analyzed thematically to uncover how functionaries and beneficiaries view core challenges, successes, and disparities. Key findings highlight significant differences and disparities between urban and rural settings. Rural programs prioritize agricultural training, vocational skills, and health awareness, leading to increased yields and income for participants. For instance, the TAT program taught effective agricultural practices, while vocational training enabled rural youth to start small businesses. Urban programs focus on educational support, financial literacy, and technical vocational education and training (TVET). The YMCA vocational training program in urban areas helped participants establish successful enterprises like a money transfer business. The study also revealed disparities in government support, with rural programs often suffering from inadequate funding and logistical challenges.

This research underscores the importance of tailoring youth empowerment programs to the specific needs of urban and rural settings. Culturally sensitive implementation strategies and community engagement are crucial for the success of these initiatives. The study highlights the need for capacity building in local organizations to sustain operations and the critical role of health education in youth

empowerment. Collaborative efforts among stakeholders can enhance program effectiveness. These insights offer valuable guidance for policymakers, development practitioners, and researchers in designing and implementing effective youth empowerment strategies in Liberia and similar contexts.

**Keywords: youth empowerment, urban-rural disparities, Liberia, socio-economic challenges, vocational training, community engagement, health awareness, qualitative research, capacity building, program effectiveness, and employment.**

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Liberia's post-conflict transition, following a protracted civil war that ended in 2003, created many challenges and opportunities for the nation's recovery and development. Central to this transition is the critical task of empowering Liberia's youth, a demographic group profoundly affected by the conflict's consequences. Liberia's young population, often referred to as the 'future,' represents both a potential demographic dividend and a significant vulnerability. Many of these young people were either born during the conflict or grew up in its immediate aftermath, experiencing the ravages of violence, displacement, and limited access to education and economic opportunities (Schwartz, 2010; Woods, 2011). As a result, they confront a range of pressing socio-economic issues, including high unemployment, inadequate educational access, and limited social services (Ebaidalla, 2016). Recognizing youth's central role in the nation's development trajectory, the Liberian government along with other actors have made concerted efforts to implement youth empowerment programs. These programs, with their varied interventions such as vocational training, education, mentorship, entrepreneurial support, and civic engagement activities, aim to equip young Liberians with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary for active participation in their communities and the broader socio-economic landscape (Morlue, 2013; Kürschner et al., 2013; Humphreys & Richards, 2005; Mac-Ikemenjima, 2008).

This study aims to address the question of how well youth empowerment programs in Liberia have been adapted to suit the diverse geographical contexts, encompassing both urban and rural settings and varying economic and social conditions. It is widely believed that the programs most effective for rural youth differ significantly from those best suited for urban youth. To answer these questions, this study conducted a comparative analysis to identify which programs according to beneficiaries and functionaries are most aligned with the unique demands of urban and rural settings. The research also examined the structures and objectives of youth empowerment programs in urban Liberia, highlighting their differences from those in rural Liberia. The study also identified what communities and personnel saw as the key success factors and challenges of youth empowerment programs in each setting, and

examined the socio-economic outcomes for young participants in urban and rural empowerment programs.

**Statement of the Problem**

The importance of youth empowerment is widely recognized, yet there exists a noticeable gap in understanding how its implementation and effectiveness vary in diverse urban and rural contexts within Liberia. Liberia's socio-economic landscape is characterized by significant disparities, particularly between urban areas typified by cities like Monrovia, Gbarnga, and Ganta, and rural regions primarily dependent on agriculture and subsistence livelihoods. These disparities manifest in the distinct experiences and challenges faced by young people residing in urban and rural settings. Urban centers boast higher population density and advanced infrastructure, but urban youth grapple with elevated unemployment rates and limited access to quality education and social services. On the other hand, rural Liberia, characterized by its vast expanse, predominantly relies on agriculture for sustenance. While rural areas may offer a more serene environment, they often lack essential infrastructure, educational facilities, and access to modern amenities, such as electricity, clean water supply and sanitation, healthcare services, and more. These factors profoundly influence the development prospects of rural youth. Consequently, one of the pivotal questions that arises is: How do youth empowerment programs differ in their objectives, methodologies, and outcomes in urban and rural Liberia, and what insights can this analysis yield regarding best practices, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing the prospects of the nation's youth?

**Objectives of the Study**

The primary objective of this study was to conduct an analysis of youth empowerment programs in urban and rural Liberia. The specific aims were to:

1. Analyze the differences in program implementation between urban and rural settings to understand how contextual factors influence strategy and outcomes.
2. Evaluate the socio-economic outcomes for youth participants to assess the real-world impacts of these programs.
3. Identify strategies to enhance the effectiveness of these programs.

4. Formulate evidence-based recommendations for designing and implementing more effective, context-specific programs that are applicable in both urban and rural settings.

**Research Questions**

To facilitate the analysis and derive meaningful insights, the study was guided by a set of research questions:

1. How do empowerment programs in urban areas differ from those in rural areas in objectives and demographics served?
2. What socio-economic outcomes are experienced by young participants in urban and rural empowerment programs?
3. What according to the community members and functionaries are the fundamental success factors and challenges confronting youth empowerment initiatives in each context? And
4. What conclusion can be drawn about the types of programs best suited to each setting?

**Scope of the Study**

This study focused on analyzing youth empowerment programs and their impact in both urban and rural areas of Liberia. The research targeted youth empowerment programs within four communities through focus group discussions: Telemai and Gorlu in Lofa County, representing rural Liberia, and Donbosco and Wood Camp in Paynesville, representing urban Liberia. It also included three key informants from Telemai and Salayea, representing rural Liberia, and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Liberia National Students Union, and the Young Men's Christian Association in urban Liberia. The study specifically focused on young people aged 18 to 45 years. It analyzed the challenges and opportunities of empowerment programs and formulated evidence-based recommendations for designing and implementing more effective, context-specific programs and strategies that work in both urban and rural settings.

**Significance of the Study**

This research examines selected aspects of the design and execution of targeted and effective youth development initiatives. Through a comparative analysis of these programs, this research aims to offer

insights that can serve as a compass for policymakers, program implementers, and development practitioners in Liberia and in similar post-conflict or developing regions. These insights will enable the tailoring of empowerment strategies to cater to the diverse needs and circumstances of the youth population, fostering more precise and impactful interventions. This study carries both academic weight and practical relevance, contributing to sustainable youth development in Liberia.

**Structure of the Paper**

This paper is organized into five segments, each addressing different aspects of the study to provide an understanding of youth empowerment programs in Liberia. Chapter One provides an overview of the study, including the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, objectives, scope, significance and structure. Chapter Two reviews existing literature on youth empowerment programs, establishing a theoretical framework and identifying gaps in the current research.

Chapter Three outlines the research methodology, detailing the research design, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, participant selection, and ethical considerations. Chapter Four presents and analyzes the data collected from focus group discussions and key informant interviews, offering insights into the structures, objectives, challenges, and opportunities of youth empowerment programs in urban and rural settings. Chapter Five discusses the implications of the findings, provides recommendations for more effective, context-specific programs and strategies, and concludes with a summary of key insights and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO
## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section explores the historical and contemporary contexts of youth empowerment in Liberia, focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced in both urban and rural settings. Liberia's mid-20th-century economic growth, driven by resource exploitation, is characterized as "growth without development" due to the concentration of wealth among a small elite and inadequate investment in infrastructure and public services. The civil war exacerbated these socio-economic disparities, marginalizing youth with high unemployment and limited educational access. In the post-war period, international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank have focused on youth empowerment through education, vocational training, and livelihood projects, such as the Youth Opportunities Project. The literature underscores the importance of tailored youth empowerment programs for urban and rural contexts, inclusive community engagement, cross-sectoral collaboration, and addressing gender-specific challenges to enhance the effectiveness of these initiatives. The Liberian government has made significant efforts to support youth empowerment programs through the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The Ministry drafted the National Youth Policy in 2006, revised it in 2017, and subsequently launched it in 2019 as a national instrument for youth development services in Liberia. The National Youth Policy of Liberia aims to promote youth participation in national decision-making processes and empower young people to engage in community and national programs. The policy outlines objectives such as sensitizing stakeholders on youth issues, forming partnerships for youth initiatives, and promoting national service and volunteerism. Proposed solutions include job creation through vacation jobs and cadet systems, promoting entrepreneurship, compulsory and free primary education, decentralized vocational training, leadership development programs, decentralizing health services, legislating against discrimination, improving health education, promoting volunteerism, increasing the enrollment of girls in schools, enhancing recreational facilities, adopting a national language, promoting national identity, and involving youth in peacebuilding processes (Ministry of Youth & Sports, Republic of Liberia, 2006).

Besides drafting the policy, the Liberian government has also collaborated with development partners like the United Nations and the World Bank on youth empowerment through education, vocational training, and livelihood projects such as the Youth Opportunities Project. Despite these efforts, tangible

results are difficult to see on the ground. As it is often said, developing policies and plans is one thing, and implementing and sustaining programs intended for youth development is another. Many policy documents have been crafted, but the challenge remains in monitoring, ownership, and sustainability of these projects. It is therefore imperative that the government moves development issues from mere paper to reality by adopting multi-faceted and integrated approaches. These include policy implementation and monitoring, institutional support and coordination, enhancing the capacity of institutions like the Ministry of Youth and Sports to coordinate and implement youth programs, encouraging cooperation among various government ministries, NGOs, and private sector partners to create a unified approach to youth development, allocating sufficient budgetary resources to youth programs including education, health, employment, and recreational activities, and enhancing healthcare focusing on reproductive health, mental health, and the prevention of diseases like HIV/AIDS. When these measures are properly implemented as per the policy, the government can ensure its preparedness and effectiveness in youth development.

**Economic Growth, Challenges, and Youth Empowerment in Post-Conflict Liberia**

Liberia's economic development and livelihood landscape have undergone significant transformations throughout its history. This evolution is particularly evident during the mid-20th century, a period marked by economic growth driven by resource exploitation and foreign investments. Major corporations such as the Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO), the Bong Mining Company (BMC), Liberia Mining Company (LMC), B.F. Goodrich Company, and Firestone Rubber Plantation Company were granted concessions for the development of new rubber plantations and iron ore mining operations. These corporations, primarily owned by foreign investors and multinational companies, played major roles in Liberia's economic landscape during this era (Clower et al., 1966). The government's facilitation of resource exploitation through these concessions did not result in substantial gains for the Liberian people in terms of steady and dignified employment. The benefits were limited, with significant economic disparities and poor working conditions prevailing (Clower et al., 1966; Browne, 1955; Calhoun, 1980; Werkerm & Beganovic, 2011).

The Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO) was owned by a consortium of Swedish and American interests, including the Swedish steel company Gränges. The Bong Mining Company (BMC) was initially owned by a German group led by Thyssen AG. The Liberia Mining Company

(LMC) was owned by American investors led by the Republic Steel Corporation. The B.F. Goodrich Company was an American multinational company known for its rubber products, and the Firestone Rubber Plantation Company was a subsidiary of the American company Firestone Tire and Rubber Company.

Despite the apparent prosperity, this phase is often characterized as a period of "growth without development," a term popularized by Clower et al. (1966) in their economic survey of Liberia. This characterization stems from several critical factors that highlight the disparities between economic growth indicators and the broader socio-economic development of the country (Clower et al., 1966).

Among the most notable factors were the concentration of economic benefits. The operation of these giant corporations in the mid-20th century generated substantial revenue. However, a significant portion of the profits from these operations was repatriated to the home countries of the foreign investors and multinational companies.

Another factor was the lack of infrastructure and public services. Despite the influx of foreign investment and economic activity, there was inadequate development of essential infrastructure and public services. The revenues generated from resource extraction were not sufficiently reinvested into building schools, hospitals, roads, and other critical infrastructure that could have supported widespread economic development (Clower et al., 1966). This underinvestment left many areas of the country, especially rural regions, without the necessary facilities to improve the quality of life and economic opportunities for the population (Clower et al., 1966).

Environmental degradation was another significant factor. Extensive resource extraction activities led to significant environmental degradation, including deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of biodiversity. These environmental impacts had adverse effects on local communities and agriculture, further hindering sustainable development. The focus on short-term economic gains from resource exploitation ignored the long-term environmental costs and the sustainability of local livelihoods (Browne, 1955).

The economy's dependency on a few sectors was also a major issue. Liberia's economy during this period was heavily dependent on a few sectors—primarily mining and rubber plantations. This lack of

economic diversification made the country vulnerable to fluctuations in global commodity prices and demand. When prices fell or demand decreased, the economy suffered disproportionately, highlighting the need for a more diversified economic base to ensure stability and resilience (Clower et al., 1966).

Additionally, there was insufficient human capital development. The limited focus on education and vocational training meant that the workforce lacked the skills necessary to take advantage of emerging economic opportunities. The shortage of a trained workforce hindered the development of local industries and the ability of Liberians to fully participate in and benefit from economic growth. This led to a cycle of poverty and underemployment, perpetuating the gap between economic growth and socio-economic development (Browne, 1955).

Moreover, corruption was recognized as a pervasive issue eroding Liberia's social and economic fabric. Even today, corruption continues to undermine Liberia's developmental agenda. Addressing corruption is seen as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving economic development and youth empowerment and ensuring that the benefits of foreign investments reach the citizens, thereby making empowerment tangible and sustainable (International Crisis Group, 2012; Mercy Corps, 2018).

Historical, psychological, and socio-economic factors also emerge as significant barriers to development in Liberia. Psychological factors include the trauma and lingering effects of the prolonged civil conflict, which have impacted the mental health and productivity of the population. The shortage of a trained workforce and a predominantly subsistence-based agricultural population have both contributed to the nation's underdevelopment (Clower et al., 1966). These factors underscore the formidable challenges faced by Liberia in its pursuit of comprehensive development and youth empowerment.

The concept of "growth without development" during Liberia's mid-20th century, as illuminated by Clower et al. (1966), emphasizes the need to gauge economic growth and evaluate its broader societal implications. This concept remains relevant as policymakers and stakeholders strive to create a more equitable and inclusive economic landscape that benefits all Liberians, particularly the youth who represent the nation's future potential.

The mid-20th century also highlighted significant deficiencies in education and healthcare in Liberia. These historical shortcomings underscore the necessity for modern youth empowerment programs to prioritize comprehensive educational opportunities and vocational training. During this period, the lack of access to quality education and vocational training severely limited the ability of many young people to secure stable employment and improve their socio-economic status (Browne, 1955). This era was characterized by inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of trained teachers, and insufficient educational materials. Consequently, many young Liberians were unable to receive even a basic education, let alone specialized vocational training. This lack of education created a cycle of poverty, as individuals without skills or knowledge struggled to find gainful employment. These issues were among the root causes that led to the military coup of 1980 and subsequently sparked the civil war from 1989 to 2003.

To address these issues, contemporary youth empowerment initiatives must provide targeted educational programs that are both accessible and relevant to the current job market. This includes not only traditional academic education but also vocational training in fields such as technology, healthcare, agriculture, and trades like carpentry and plumbing. By equipping young people with practical skills, these programs can help reduce unemployment and foster economic independence among Liberia's youth (Browne, 1955; International Crisis Group, 2012).

One of the critical needs is to enhance the educational landscape by addressing the infrastructural deficits, improving the quality of teaching, and ensuring that educational materials are readily available. Contemporary youth empowerment programs must aim to bridge these gaps by providing education that combines theoretical knowledge with practical skills. For example, programs focusing on technology and healthcare can prepare youth for jobs in these rapidly growing sectors, while agricultural training can help young people improve farming practices, increase productivity, and enhance food security. Additionally, training in trades such as carpentry and plumbing can provide immediate employment opportunities and support the development of local infrastructure (World Bank, 2020).

The mid-20th century focus on resource exploitation, such as deforestation and its environmental impacts, underscores the urgent need for sustainable development education within youth programs. During this era, extensive logging and agricultural expansion led to significant environmental degradation, including soil erosion and loss of biodiversity (Browne, 1955). These activities not only

depleted natural resources but also compromised the ecological balance, making it difficult for future generations to benefit from these resources.

Modern youth empowerment initiatives should include training in sustainable agricultural practices, environmental conservation, and climate change mitigation. Educating young people about sustainable development practices is crucial for preventing the repetition of past mistakes and promoting long-term environmental stewardship. These programs can teach youths how to balance economic activities with ecological preservation, ensuring that future generations inherit a healthier and more sustainable environment (Browne, 1955; Mercy Corps, 2018).

To prevent a recurrence of conflicts, it is imperative for the government to prioritize inclusive development policies that ensure the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. The government must invest in education and livelihood generation. Educating people without offering them support makes it difficult for them to apply their knowledge about sustainable agriculture in the absence of an enabling environment. Investments in education, healthcare, and infrastructure are crucial to empowering citizens and fostering sustainable development. By creating an enabling environment, the government can ensure that individuals have the resources and opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills effectively. This approach will help address the underlying causes of discontent and create a more stable and prosperous future for all Liberians.

**Lessons from Liberia's 1980-1989 Instability**

The period between 1980 and 1989 witnessed significant economic decline and instability in Liberia. Several factors contributed to the country's descent into conflict during this period, which have been discussed extensively in previous chapters. Key reasons included the country's heavy reliance on natural resource exports, a lack of economic diversification, and the concentration of wealth and power among a small elite. Additionally, foreign corporations involved in the extraction of Liberia's natural resources, such as iron ore, rubber, and timber, significantly benefited by repatriating profits to their home countries. This situation was further compounded by corruption and nepotism. These factors set the stage for the conflict that erupted in 1989 (Werker & Beganovic, 2011). To fully understand the importance of youth empowerment, it is essential to consider this historical background.

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Liberia's history finds its roots in the 19th century when the nation was established by freed American slaves, giving rise to a legacy of Americo-Liberian rule (Werker & Beganovic, 2011). This historical legacy forged a governance system wherein descendants of these settlers held both political and economic dominion. This ruling elite, who predominantly comprised of Americo-Liberians, held a vice-like grip on Liberia's political and economic landscape for an astonishing 133 years (Werker & Beganovic, 2011). Americo-Liberians are descendants of freed African-American and Caribbean slaves who settled in Liberia starting in the early 19th century (Sullivan, 1988; Sawyer, 1992). They established Monrovia and other coastal areas, bringing with them Western customs, education systems, and Christian religion (Gershoni, 1993). Americo-Liberians dominated the political, economic, and social landscape of Liberia for more than a century, forming the ruling elite and controlling the government and key resources until the 1980 coup d'état (Sawyer, 1992). They primarily spoke English and adopted Western dress and customs (Sullivan, 1988). They were predominantly Christian, following Protestant denominations brought from America (Gershoni, 1993). They lived in urban centers with Western-style infrastructure, governance, and education systems (Ellis, 2006).

Americo-Liberians had better access to Western-style education and employment opportunities and often held positions in the government, business, and other influential sectors (Gershoni, 1993). They controlled significant economic resources and land, particularly in urban areas (Sullivan, 1988). Americo-Liberians dominated Liberia's political scene through the True Whig Party, maintaining control over the government from the establishment of the republic in 1847 until the coup in 1980 (Gershoni, 1993). They implemented policies that favored their interests, often at the expense of the indigenous population (Sullivan, 1988).

The indigenous population consists of various ethnic groups native to the region, including the Kpelle, Bassa, Gio, Mano, Kru, and others (Sullivan, 1988). Each ethnic group has its own languages, customs, and traditional practices. They primarily occupied the interior regions of Liberia (Ellis, 2006). Historically, the indigenous population was marginalized by the Americo-Liberian settlers. They had limited access to education, political power, and economic opportunities (Gershoni, 1993). The indigenous population spoke a variety of indigenous languages, reflecting the country's ethnic diversity (Sullivan, 1988). They practiced traditional African religions, although many also adopted Christianity

and Islam (Ellis, 2006). They lived in rural areas, with societies structured around clan and kinship systems, practicing subsistence agriculture and traditional crafts (Sawyer, 1992).

The indigenous population historically had limited access to formal education and were underrepresented in government and professional sectors (Sawyer, 1992). They primarily engaged in subsistence farming, fishing, and traditional economic activities. Economic opportunities were fewer compared to the Americo-Liberians (Ellis, 2006). The indigenous population was largely excluded from political power and decision-making processes. Their interests and needs were often overlooked in national policies (Ellis, 2006). The 1980 coup led by Samuel Doe, an indigenous leader, marked a significant shift, bringing more indigenous Liberians into political power and changing the dynamics of governance in Liberia (Sawyer, 1992).

Under Americo-Liberian rule, access to major governmental positions, higher education, and avenues for economic advancement was largely monopolized, perpetuating profound disparities between Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population, who were subjected to systemic discrimination and exclusion from crucial economic and political spheres (Clower et al., 1966).

These historical inequities underscore the importance of youth empowerment programs that promote inclusive economic policies, ensuring equitable access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities (Werker & Beganovic, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2012).

Empowering young people can address entrenched inequities by providing marginalized groups with the skills and opportunities needed to participate fully in the economy and governance. This empowerment can bridge the gap between the elite and the broader population by providing equitable access to resources, education, and employment, fostering sustainable development and social stability (World Bank, 2020). Empowering youth with diverse skills through vocational training in various sectors such as technology, healthcare, agriculture, and trades can foster economic diversification, reducing dependency on a few industries and enhancing economic resilience (African Development Bank Group, 2022). Youth empowerment also helps mitigate political instability, socio-economic disparities, and exclusion as seen before the Liberian civil war (Werker & Beganovic, 2011), reducing the likelihood of their involvement in conflict (Mercy Corps, 2018). The shortage of a trained workforce has been a significant barrier to Liberia's development (Clower et al., 1966). By investing in youth through

comprehensive education and vocational training programs, the country can build a more skilled and adaptable workforce, which is essential for economic growth and competitiveness in the global market (World Bank, 2020).

Youth empowerment programs should also focus on economic diversification and entrepreneurship, encouraging young people to explore various sectors such as technology, agriculture, and services, building a more resilient economy less susceptible to external economic pressures (World Bank, 2020; African Development Bank Group, 2022).

The socio-economic disparities and the government's inability to address the demands for wider political and economic participation of young people contributed immensely to the volatility that occurred in 1980 and subsequently 1989. As a young Liberian, President Samuel Doe seized power in a coup in 1980, aiming to navigate the conflicting demands of various constituencies, including the non-settler class, young urban and rural dwellers, and the military (Werker & Beganovic, 2011). Soon, his government was caught in a web of economic challenges, political tensions, and mounting discontent, which subsequently plunged into turmoil with the outbreak of the Liberian Civil War in 1989. Charles Taylor, a former Doe bureaucrat, spearheaded an uprising, garnering support from marginalized youth who felt disenchanted, frustrated, and abandoned (Werker & Beganovic, 2011). Already vulnerable, the war made them even more so, as they could not attend school or acquire skills to manage their futures. Their prospects were shattered, leading many into banditry and drug use.

Modern youth empowerment initiatives must focus on rebuilding educational and economic systems, providing targeted support to war-affected youth, ensuring they have the resources and skills needed to integrate into the economy and contribute to national development (World Bank, 2020; Mercy Corps, 2018). As the country transitions from war, it is crucial to focus on economic diversification by addressing the educational and vocational training needs and promoting sustainable development education that helps overcome the historical deficiencies that have hindered Liberia's development, building a more resilient and sustainable future for its youth (World Bank, 2020; Mercy Corps, 2018).

**Addressing Post-Conflict Challenges in Liberia**

To address post-conflict challenges effectively, government and corporations can play a pivotal role by integrating youth into their operations and community development initiatives. By focusing on education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development, corporations can empower young Liberians to contribute positively to the country's recovery and growth. The government needs to implement policies and plans to ensure that Liberian youth are integrated into corporate operations, avoiding previous mistakes seen from the 1920s through the 1990s (Clower et al., 1966; Werker & Beganovic, 2011).

Historically, major corporations such as the Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals Company (LAMCO), the Bong Mining Company (BMC), Liberia Mining Company (LMC), and B.F. Goodrich Company left the country due to the war, except for Firestone Rubber Plantation Company (Clower et al., 1966). New corporations have since entered and signed agreements with the government to exploit the country's mineral and agricultural resources. It is critical to note that, from a sustainable development standpoint, youth are the most valuable asset to a country's economy. To sustain the economy, they must be heavily targeted through education and vocational training programs to prepare them for a transformative economy that is sustainable and viable (Radelet, 2007; Werker & Beganovic, 2011).

ArcelorMittal Liberia is a global steel and mining company operating in more than 60 countries. In Liberia, it is involved in iron ore mining, particularly in the Nimba region. The company's operations include the mining, transportation, and shipping of iron ore. In 2005, ArcelorMittal signed a Mineral Development Agreement (MDA) with the Government of Liberia, amended in 2013 to expand its operations. This agreement includes commitments to infrastructure development, job creation, and community investments (ArcelorMittal, 2023). Despite establishing a small training hub in mining and electrical engineering, many administrative positions are still occupied by foreigners, with Liberians predominantly in laborer roles. Revising the contractual agreement to open more training opportunities could help integrate more young Liberians into the workforce, not only for ArcelorMittal but across various trades and educational fields (Clower et al., 1966).

Golden Veroleum Liberia, a subsidiary of the Golden Agri-Resources (GAR) group, is one of the largest palm oil producers globally, focusing on palm oil production in Liberia with substantial investments in

Eastern Liberia. In 2010, Golden Veroleum signed a concession agreement with the Liberian government to develop palm oil plantations covering approximately 220,000 hectares, which includes commitments to sustainable agricultural practices and community development (Golden Veroleum Liberia, 2023). While there have been improvements in employment rates, the physical state still appears deplorable regarding unemployment, especially for young people. Furthermore, reliance on monoculture farming, particularly of cash crops, is inherently unsustainable. Monoculture depletes soil nutrients, increases vulnerability to pests and diseases, and reduces biodiversity, leading to long-term ecological and economic instability. While these investments bring economic benefits in the short term, it is important to consider the negative consequences and address long-term development plans such as sustainable agriculture. This can be achieved by investing in food and environmentally friendly crops and initiating training and capacity building in both formal and informal vocations to adequately prepare Liberians for the job market, particularly the youth population (O'Neill, 2024).

Other mining exploration companies include Liberia Western Cluster, MNG Gold Liberia, Bea Mountain Mining Corporation, and China Union. All these companies signed a Mineral Development Agreement with the Government of Liberia, with commitments to job creation, infrastructure development, and environmental management. The creation of these companies is one thing, and having a competent Liberian labor force with the expertise to deliver on the job is another. As Werker and Beganovic (2011) noted, after more than two decades of conflict, the shortage of skilled workers was tremendous, and the government, donors, NGOs, and foreign investors had trouble finding managers and technicians in the country. The demand for skilled labor was met only partially by a growing number of Liberians returning from the diaspora. This scenario is one of the most cardinal challenges that Liberia faces as it opens to investors. To reduce the unemployment rate and address the daunting challenges of labor shortages, there has to be training of young people to get involved.

Integrating youth into these corporate operations is crucial for addressing Liberia's post-conflict challenges. Empowering youth through education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, and community engagement not only aids in rebuilding the country but also ensures a more stable and prosperous future for Liberia. Historical lessons from past corporations in Liberia highlight the importance of investing in local communities through education and vocational training (Clower et al., 1966; Browne, 1955). Companies like Firestone and the Liberia Mining Company provided infrastructure development, but the

benefits were not widely distributed among the local population. This underscores the need for modern corporations to ensure that their community investments are inclusive and benefit a broader segment of the population (Werker & Beganovic, 2011).

Adopting sustainable practices is essential to prevent the environmental degradation seen in the past, which negatively impacted local communities (Browne, 1955). Modern corporations must commit to transparency and ethical practices, ensuring that their operations are accountable and contribute positively to the governance of the country (International Crisis Group, 2012). The government must implement policies and regulations to promote sustainable agriculture, provide financial incentives, and offer training programs to educate farmers. Ensuring corporate accountability and involving youth in decision-making processes will foster transparency and innovation (International Crisis Group, 2012). Supporting economic diversification and youth entrepreneurship will create a resilient economy and long-term sustainability (Werker & Beganovic, 2011).

**International and National Discourses on Development in Liberia**

This section provides an overview of the trends, challenges, and opportunities in the development discourse in Liberia, with a specific focus on youth empowerment, rural livelihood diversification, and agricultural transformation. It underscores the significance of holistic, youth-centric approaches that harness the strengths of diverse sectors and actively involve young people in shaping their own developmental trajectory.

The developmental landscape of Liberia has undergone a transformative shift, particularly post-civil war. Historically, multinational investors predominantly influenced development, focusing on mining and cash crop cultivation, mainly rubber and palm production. However, the aftermath of the war marked a significant change, leading to increased involvement of multinational bodies such as the United Nations, aid agencies, World Bank, IMF, and the European Union. This shift gained prominence, especially with the emergence of challenges posed by a growing youth population lacking formal education and skills (World Bank, 2020; UNDP-Liberia, 2021).

According to recent statistics, literacy rates in Liberia have shown some improvement but remain relatively low compared to global averages. For persons aged 15 years and older, the literacy rate is

approximately 48% to 51%, indicating that nearly half of the adult population struggles with basic reading and writing skills (World Bank, n.d.). Among the youth aged 15-24, the literacy rate is higher, around 60% to 65%, reflecting the impact of recent educational initiatives but also highlighting the need for continued improvement (UNICEF Liberia, n.d.).

To tackle the growing challenges of low literacy rate and improve the demand for higher education and advanced skills required for service delivery, there is a need for a comprehensive approach to meet this demand. Initiatives should include strengthening basic education infrastructure, expanding adult literacy programs, and integrating vocational training that targets skills required in the service industry (Friends of Liberia, 2015). Enhancing literacy from an early age, alongside offering continuing education for adults, will help build a workforce capable of advancing into higher education and acquiring necessary skills for the service sector (Global Partnership for Education, 2018).

Similarly, in addressing the challenges of the agricultural sector, where the majority of Liberia's population is engaged, it is vital to increase access to modern agricultural education, resources, and financial support. Implementing programs that provide farmers with high-quality seeds, appropriate equipment, and essential inputs like fertilizers and pest control is crucial for Liberia's economic growth (GAFSP Proposal, 2020). Additionally, establishing financial support systems through subsidies or low-interest loans will enable farmers to invest in necessary technologies and inputs (Financial Study of Financing Agricultural MSMEs in Liberia, 2022). Furthermore, knowledge sharing through community-led initiatives such as farmer field schools and agricultural cooperatives can enhance productivity and sustainability (World Bank, 2017).

Additionally, a robust policy framework that prioritizes education and agricultural development, supported by government and international collaboration, is essential. Policies should encourage private investment and international partnerships that bring both capital and expertise, as well as leverage technology in both education through e-learning platforms and agriculture through apps that offer real-time data for a transformative process (INASP, 2018). By integrating these strategies, Liberia stands firm to foster a more educated workforce and a more productive agricultural sector, setting a foundation for sustainable socio-economic development

Liberia faced a dual challenge post-war, further exacerbated by the devastating Ebola crisis. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a longstanding partner, escalated its efforts during the war and extended its involvement during the Ebola crisis and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic. The UNDP's interventions focused on post-pandemic recovery, emphasizing income-generating opportunities, especially for vulnerable groups, with a particular emphasis on women and youth. Initiatives included livelihood projects, community infrastructure investments, environmental services, and vocational/life skills training, including digital skills for youth. Business and enterprise development also became a key focus, providing support in access to finance, capacity-building, and innovation (UNDP-Liberia, 2021; Mercy Corps, 2018).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, particularly regarding the slow progress in empowering the growing impoverished youth population. Questions arise about the design and effectiveness of these programs, emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the demographic focus, whether urban or rural, and the underlying principles guiding program implementation (UNDP-Liberia, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

The World Bank, a longstanding developmental partner since the 1970s, gained increased relevance during and after the Liberian civil war. Engaging in various developmental initiatives, one noteworthy project is the Youth Opportunities Project initiated in 2003. This project, funded at $13.5 million, focuses on empowering economically disadvantaged and vulnerable youth in both urban and rural communities (World Bank, 2020). The comprehensive approach includes life and business skills training, enhanced agricultural techniques, and provide financial support for productive inclusion in both rural and urban settings (World Bank, 2020).

The Youth Opportunities Project has achieved significant outcomes, impacting over 12,000 youth with comprehensive training, enabling effective farm management in rural areas and supporting urban youth in developing successful business plans (World Bank, 2020). The project also facilitated the cultivation of agricultural land, contributing significantly to food security. Agro-processing machines were provided to several beneficiaries, further enhancing community services (World Bank, 2020). A follow-up operation is under consideration, focusing on restoring informal sector employment lost due to the impact of COVID-19 (World Bank, 2020).

The multifaceted initiatives led by the UNDP and the World Bank in Liberia reflect a commitment to addressing complex challenges. While commendable progress has been made, challenges persist, necessitating a deeper understanding of program design and the target demographic for more effective and efficient development interventions. The collaborative efforts of multinational bodies and developmental partners are crucial in empowering Liberia's youth and fostering sustainable economic development (World Bank, 2020; UNDP-Liberia, 2021; Mercy Corps, 2018).

The emphasis on youth-centric approaches by international bodies like the UNDP and the World Bank directly impacts youth empowerment in Liberia. These organizations focus on providing comprehensive educational opportunities and vocational training tailored to the needs of young Liberians. For instance, the Youth Opportunities Project provides life skills and business training that enhance the employability and entrepreneurial capabilities of the youth, ensuring they can actively participate in and benefit from economic activities (World Bank, 2020).

Furthermore, the initiatives focusing on digital skills and business development by the UNDP aim to equip young people with the necessary tools to thrive in a modern economy. These programs help bridge the gap between education and employment, fostering a skilled and adaptable workforce crucial for Liberia's economic growth (UNDP-Liberia, 2021).

The lessons from historical development practices in Liberia, where benefits were not widely distributed among the local population, emphasize the importance of inclusive community investments. Modern corporations and development programs must ensure that their efforts are inclusive, providing equal opportunities for all segments of the population, particularly the youth (Clower et al., 1966; Werker & Beganovic, 2011). This inclusivity helps mitigate socio-economic disparities and promotes a more stable and prosperous society.

**Rural Livelihood Diversification**

Rural Livelihood Diversification involves engaging people, especially young individuals, in various economic activities to sustain their livelihoods. Hilson and Van Bockstael (2012) conducted a study focusing on rural livelihood challenges in Liberia, emphasizing subsistence rice farming, supplementary

cassava farming, artisanal diamond mining, and the overarching threat of competition from imported rice.

In Liberia, subsistence rice farming serves as a vital component of rural livelihoods, deeply rooted in local culture and traditions. However, challenges such as low productivity, susceptibility to climate change, and limited market access for surplus production pose threats to the economic well-being of communities reliant on this practice (Hilson & Van Bockstael, 2012). To address these challenges, a comprehensive approach is needed, incorporating improved farming techniques, access to modern technologies, and infrastructure development for market accessibility.

Cassava farming is another integral aspect of rural livelihoods, offering a diversification strategy for income and food sources. Despite its adaptability and resilience, challenges in market access, the need for improved agricultural practices, and the absence of processing facilities hinder the economic potential of cassava farming (Hilson & Van Bockstael, 2012). Comprehensive interventions, including infrastructure improvements and training programs, are essential to enhance the economic viability of cassava cultivation.

Artisanal diamond mining, while providing economic opportunities, brings forth challenges such as environmental degradation, conflicts over mining rights, and vulnerability to global diamond price fluctuations. Sustainable mining practices, effective regulations, and market access interventions are crucial to mitigate these challenges and foster the economic stability of communities engaged in artisanal diamond mining (Hilson & Van Bockstael, 2012).

The broader challenge of competition from imported rice poses a significant threat to local rice farmers in Liberia. Cheaper imported rice can undermine the economic viability of local farmers, leading to economic difficulties and potentially compromising food security at the local level. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted approach, including targeted policies, market promotion of locally produced rice, and advocacy for fair trade practices in international agreements (Hilson & Van Bockstael, 2012).

In designing programs for young people in Liberia, particularly in rural areas, it is essential to consider the specifics of these challenges. As youth in rural communities often focus on agriculture and sometimes mining, programs should provide adequate training in these sectors to enhance their marketability and productivity. Collaborative efforts between local communities, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and international bodies are crucial to developing sustainable solutions that address the diverse challenges faced by rural livelihoods in Liberia.

**Youth Empowerment, Education, and Agriculture**

Since the end of the Liberia civil war, the plight of the youth concerning education, skills development, empowerment, and employment has become a focal point. The young generation in Liberia, having experienced the direct impact of the civil war, faces alienation, frustration, and vulnerability. Urgently addressing and changing their mindset is crucial for the overall development of Liberia (Ministry of Youth & Sports, 2006).

There is a large body of literature and policy documentation that offers critiques, but the actual implementation of these policy documents remains a serious challenge. While documentation is vital for planning and quality purposes, the plans must be implemented to effect positive change. There is a growing concern among stakeholders about the future of Liberia if the young generation lacks the necessary skills and education for sustaining and expanding the developmental gains made so far. Therefore, empowering youth in Liberia, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, is identified as a priority.

Munive et al. (2006) advocate for a comprehensive and integrated approach to youth empowerment, recognizing the intricate interplay of economic, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. The literature underscores the need for a multifaceted strategy to effectively address the complex challenges faced by the youth population. Economic stability is emphasized through skill development programs and enhanced financial literacy among the youth. Cultural considerations, respecting and integrating local traditions, are deemed crucial, as are efforts to foster community cohesion and inclusive participation.

Psychological well-being is highlighted as a critical aspect of youth empowerment, addressing trauma, building resilience, and providing mental health support. Education and skill development are integral components, aiming to improve educational access and quality, as well as enhance vocational and technical skills. The literature advocates for community and institutional support, encouraging partnerships with local entities to create a supportive ecosystem for youth development. The comprehensive approach aims at achieving long-term sustainability, laying a foundation for continued growth and development tailored to the specific challenges and opportunities present in rural and peri-urban contexts.

Recognizing the diminishing relevance of traditional industries, particularly in the aftermath of the civil war, Munive et al. (2006) stress the need to transform the agricultural sector. This transformation is seen as vital for addressing economic challenges and creating sustainable opportunities for youth, especially those in rural and urban areas. The call for agricultural transformation involves advocating for substantial investment in mechanization and modern farming techniques. This includes adopting contemporary technologies and machinery to enhance efficiency, increase productivity, and reduce manual labor.

A key aspect of this transformation is the emphasis on equipping youth with the technical skills essential for success in modern agriculture. Munive et al. (2006) stress the importance of targeted training programs focusing on the use and maintenance of advanced farming equipment, precision agriculture, and sustainable farming practices. The envisioned transformation extends beyond mere agricultural production; it encompasses the entire value chain, from cultivation to distribution. A holistic approach is recommended to create a dynamic and competitive agricultural sector capable of generating sustainable livelihoods for the youth. This involves integrating agribusiness concepts, value addition processes, and market-oriented strategies to ensure that agriculture becomes a viable and profitable venture. Overall, the literature proposes a comprehensive strategy to empower the youth, enhance education and skills, and transform the agricultural sector for sustainable development in Liberia.

**Challenges and Opportunities in Rural Youth Empowerment**

Rural youth empowerment in Liberia faces numerous challenges and opportunities, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic dynamics at play. Trivelli and Morel (2021)

highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by young individuals in traditional rural settings, including remoteness, low population density, limited in-person interactions, seasonality, and migration. These factors historically impede effective participation mechanisms for rural youth. Structural rural transformation is identified as a positive force mitigating these challenges, fostering connections between urban and rural settings and creating opportunities for mentoring and partnerships. Successful collaboration initiatives, like "Driving Youth-Led New Agribusiness and Microenterprise" (DYNAMIC) and "Youth Empowerment through Agriculture" (Y.E.T.A.) in Uganda, illustrate the potential of urban-rural partnerships (Trivelli & Morel, 2021). Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are recognized for their transformative role, providing avenues for engaging rural youth in participation mechanisms and contributing to their empowerment. Political receptiveness is crucial, especially during transitions, to implement successful participation mechanisms.

While acknowledging the benefits of youth participation, Trivelli and Morel (2021) caution against tokenism and manipulation. They stress the importance of avoiding engagement on stereotypically framed "youth topics" and emphasize the need for meaningful youth voices on substantial issues impacting their lives. The text calls for rigorous research, including randomized control trials and qualitative evaluations, to measure the impact of participatory interventions. Trivelli and Morel (2021) underscore the transformative potential of rural youth participation, advocating for the construction and strengthening of meaningful public participation mechanisms, particularly in the context of structural rural transformation.

Munive, Wisner II, and Lakovits (2006) provide insights into the challenges confronted by rural and peri-urban youth in Liberia. Rooted in historical factors such as civil war, economic instability, and limited educational access, these challenges have marginalized the youth population. Advocating for a holistic approach to youth empowerment and employment, the authors align with other scholars, emphasizing economic, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions. Individual-level recommendations include psychological support, career guidance, and addressing the psychological scars of conflict. Transforming the agricultural sector beyond subsistence farming is essential, requiring investment in mechanization and modern farming techniques. Gender inclusivity is central, advocating for non-traditional career paths and workplace protection for women (Munive et al., 2006).

At the community level, Munive et al. (2006) emphasize the pivotal role of traditional skills training through apprenticeships facilitated by micro-enterprises. Identifying and strengthening existing apprenticeship programs, revitalizing traditional crafts, and facilitating knowledge transfer to younger generations are deemed essential components of youth development. Active engagement and involvement of young people in these initiatives are underscored as pivotal for enhancing local economies and social conditions. Nationally, policy reinforcement for education, comprehensive youth policy, and public work schemes are recommended. Munive et al (2006) recommend a holistic approach encompassing skills development, infrastructure enhancement, and gender-sensitive policies to create a more inclusive and economically empowered society.

Combining insights from Trivelli and Morel (2021) and Munive et al. (2006) offers a nuanced understanding of youth empowerment in rural and peri-urban areas. Trivelli and Morel (2021) and Munive et al. (2006) underscore the importance of holistic strategies, recognizing the interconnectedness of economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors in youth development. Urban-rural partnerships and technological advancements emerge as transformative elements, bridging gaps and providing avenues for meaningful engagement. Policymakers and practitioners should consider these nuanced approaches in designing effective youth empowerment programs, ensuring inclusivity, and addressing the diverse challenges faced by young individuals in different geographical contexts.

### 2.8 Youth Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa

Youth empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa encompasses a broad range of challenges and strategies, reflecting the complex socio-economic landscape of the region. Mutuku (2011) emphasizes the need to amplify the voices of African youth and actively involve them in the developmental process. Key areas of focus include access to education and healthcare, addressing unemployment, and understanding the unique challenges faced by street children. Education is highlighted as a pivotal element for broadening horizons and creating meaningful employment opportunities. Mutuku's insights also draw attention to targeted programs for street children, contributing to enhanced youth education and empowerment (Mutuku, 2011).

Lindberg's (2023) examination of Liberia's labor market reveals persistent challenges rooted in historical legacies, such as the enduring influence of patronage networks and informal labor arrangements. These

factors significantly impact youth unemployment, with societal status and historical background often determining access to formal employment. This perpetuates economic disparities and disenchantment among the youth, highlighting the need for systemic changes and unbiased policies to dismantle these deeply entrenched inequalities (Lindberg, 2023).

Adoho et al.'s (2014) study of youth unemployment in Liberia and the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) project provides valuable insights into potential solutions. The EPAG project emphasizes skills and knowledge development, making young women more marketable in the workforce. This approach highlights the importance of supply-side and demand-side interventions in youth employment programs, recognizing the interconnectedness of skill development and job creation for effective youth empowerment (Adoho et al., 2014).

**Holistic Approaches to Sustainable Youth Development in Liberia**

The challenges faced by Liberian youth, arising from the enduring civil war and the Ebola crisis, underscore the critical need for strategic interventions that promote sustainable development. Scholars such as Blom et al. (2021), Kürschner et al. (2013), and Jessee et al. (2021) have explored the interconnected themes of peace and development indicators in Liberia, focusing on youth empowerment through sport for development programming, cross-sectoral collaboration, and policy-driven initiatives.

Blom et al. (2021) highlight the transformative power of sports in fostering positive development among Liberian youth. Programs like Life and Change Experienced Through Sport (L.A.C.E.S.) leverage sports as a medium for instilling valuable skills and attributes in young individuals. These benefits include the development of social skills, conflict resolution abilities, and community engagement. By participating in sports programs like L.A.C.E.S., young individuals in both urban and rural settings not only acquire physical fitness but also develop crucial life skills that contribute to their holistic growth. These programs foster teamwork, communication, and cooperation among participants (Blom et al., 2021).

In a post-civil war and post-Ebola context, where communities grapple with tensions and disputes, the ability to peacefully resolve conflicts becomes a valuable asset. Sports provide a structured and constructive environment where individuals learn to manage disagreements, navigate challenges, and collaborate towards the common development of their community. The inclusion of sports icons like

George Weah adds an inspirational layer to the narrative. Weah's success story, originating from Liberia and attaining global recognition in soccer, serves as a tangible example for young people in Liberia and around the world. Building upon the significant success that sports bring to the development discourse of youth, one might infer that sports can indeed enhance motivation among young individuals to become icons for positive change. Blom et al. (2021) emphasize the pivotal role of sports in positive youth development in Liberia, suggesting that sports transcend mere physical activities. They serve as a tool for building character, fostering essential life skills, and inspiring young individuals to envision a path to success, thereby contributing to the overall well-being and development of Liberian youth.

Transitioning to the economic aspect, Kürschner et al. (2013) provide a comprehensive review of youth employment and economic development in South-East Liberia. Acknowledging the historical context of the civil war is crucial, as it has left lasting scars on the economic landscape and the youth population in South-East Liberia, which is predominantly a rural community. The disruptions caused by the conflict have had enduring consequences, affecting educational opportunities, psychosocial well-being, and overall economic stability. In response to these challenges, Kürschner et al. (2013) highlight government policies designed to empower young people and reduce unemployment. The Employment Policy of 2009 is a notable initiative, outlining strategies for job creation, particularly targeted at the youth. This policy demonstrates a commitment to addressing economic challenges and fostering opportunities for young individuals in the region.

Furthermore, the Liberian National Youth Policy serves as a comprehensive framework addressing various aspects of youth development, including education, employment, health, and participation in decision-making processes. This policy recognizes young people as agents of change, emphasizing the harnessing of their potential for the betterment of the community and society at large (Kürschner et al., 2013).

Jessee et al. (2021) contribute to the discourse on youth development by advocating for a cross-sectoral perspective, emphasizing the adoption of a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach. This approach signifies a paradigm shift that recognizes young people not as passive recipients of services but as valuable assets within their communities. The PYD approach underscores the importance of

collaboration across various sectors to create a holistic strategy addressing the multifaceted nature of youth development.

Building on the economic foundations discussed in the previous literature, the study suggests that youth empowerment should go beyond mere inclusion. Instead, it should involve entrusting young people with responsibilities and resources, positioning them as active contributors and leaders in community initiatives. This empowerment strategy aligns with the notion that meaningful engagement and participation lead to more sustainable outcomes in youth development.

The emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration acknowledges that the challenges faced by young people often span multiple domains, such as education, employment, health, and social services (Jessee et al., 2021). Rather than addressing these challenges in isolation, the study advocates for a holistic approach that integrates efforts across various sectors. This collaborative strategy is seen as a means to provide a comprehensive support system that aligns with the diverse needs of youth.

By fostering collaboration among different technical sector teams within donor organizations, Jessee et al. (2021) suggest that organizations can avoid duplicating efforts and pool resources to achieve common goals. This coordinated approach enhances efficiency in resource allocation, minimizing wastage, and maximizing impact.

However, the study acknowledges that implementing cross-sectoral programs comes with challenges. The complexity of coordinating efforts among different sectors, each with its own goals, priorities, and methodologies, may lead to administrative challenges and potential conflicts. Resource allocation, a critical aspect of such collaborations, may give rise to disputes, bureaucracy, and slowed decision-making processes.

Jessee et al. (2021) advocate for a transformative approach to youth development by emphasizing a shift in focus from immediate outcomes to longer-term impacts through policy and norm change. This perspective recognizes that sustainable and lasting improvements in the lives of young people require interventions that address systemic issues, promote social inclusion, and contribute to the creation of more equitable and just societies.

The call for policy and norm change aligns with the understanding that many challenges faced by young people are deeply rooted in broader systemic issues, including discriminatory policies and harmful social norms. By targeting these fundamental aspects, policy-driven initiatives have the potential to create transformative changes that go beyond surface-level improvements. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of Liberia, where historical challenges and societal norms may pose significant barriers to youth development.

Addressing systemic issues through policy change involves a comprehensive approach that engages various stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and communities. Jessee et al. (2021) suggest that such collaborative efforts can result in more effective and coordinated solutions, ensuring that policies are formulated and effectively implemented on the ground. This collaborative approach recognizes that youth development is a multifaceted challenge that requires contributions from diverse sectors and stakeholders.

## CHAPTER THREE
## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the design and methodology employed in the study. It encompasses key aspects such as research design, population and sample, data collection procedures and analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations inherent in the research.

**Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing four focus group discussions (FGD) and six key informant interviews (KII). According to Pathak, Jena, and Kalra (2013), qualitative research explores the subjective dimensions of individuals' lives, aiming to uncover the richness and depth of their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and interactions. Nyumba et al. (2018) describe FGDs as a qualitative method that explores social issues by seeking data from a purposively selected group. Tremblay (1957) defines KII as a type of interview that generates a comprehensive description, offering an in-depth understanding of the social and cultural patterns within a specific group or community. These approaches were fully utilized, enabling me to explore the problem surrounding the study in detail.

Two of the FGDs were held in Don Bosco in Caresburg and Wood Camp, Montserrado County, Liberia, while the other two were held in Telemai and Gorlu in Salayea District, Lofa County, Liberia. Three of the KIIs were conducted in Telemai and Salayea, Lofa County, and the remaining three in Monrovia with the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Liberian National Students Union.

The FGD members for this research were selected based on their level of interest and involvement in project activities in both urban and rural Liberia, allowing them to share their views, experiences, and perceptions in a supportive environment. This approach facilitated a deep exploration of the challenges, successes, and disparities within urban and rural youth empowerment initiatives. Each of these FGDs lasted for approximately one and a half hours. Key informants were also selected based on their understanding and influence within programs in both urban and rural Liberia. KII discussions lasted for

one hour, ensuring active participation and maintaining data quality without overburdening the participants. The collected data were analyzed thematically.

**Population and Sample**

This study targeted young individuals aged 18 to 40 in both urban and rural Liberia, focusing on those who faced educational disadvantages and socio-economic challenges, making them potentially vulnerable populations. While the United Nations defines 'youth' as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNDESA, n.d.), Liberian development specialists have extended the definition to include individuals up to 40 years old. This adjustment accounts for the years of life and growth lost during the Liberian Civil War (1989-2003), acknowledging the unique socio-historical context of the country. Although the definition of youth in Liberia differs from the UN standard, the adjustment to target individuals aged 18 and above was made to align with ethical concerns raised by the IRB, as those under 18 are considered minors. .

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants. According to Tongco (2007), purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting informants based on specific qualities, using a non-random technique that does not require underlying theories or a predetermined number of informants. This method was effective given the study's focus on specific geographic youth populations, ensuring the selection of individuals who could adequately address the research issues.

Six respondents were selected for key informant interviews (KII) using purposive sampling. The key informants were divided into two groups- urban and rural. The first group included three executives from government and NGOs focused on youth development, such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Liberian National Students Union. These individuals possessed extensive experience and expertise in youth development programs. The second group comprised community leaders who had supported or implemented youth empowerment programs in their communities.

The KIs in urban areas differed significantly from those in rural areas in terms of their levels of decision-making capacities. Urban KIs, being executives from established government and NGO organizations, typically had higher decision-making authority and access to greater resources. In

contrast, rural KIs, mainly community leaders, operated at a more localized level. Their decision-making capacities were often limited by the availability of resources and the support they received from higher-level authorities.

The difference in decision-making capacities between urban and rural KIs can be attributed to the centralized nature of governance and resource distribution in Liberia. Urban KIs typically have more direct access to funding, logistical support, and policy-making platforms, allowing them to exert greater influence over broader initiatives. On the other hand, rural KIs often face challenges related to limited infrastructure, bureaucratic constraints, and fewer opportunities for professional development, which can hinder their decision-making capabilities and impact.

Additionally, 40 participants for the focus group discussions (FGD)—10 participants per FGD across two urban and two rural sites—were identified through snowball sampling. This approach involved referrals from initial participants to recruit additional participants. Snowball sampling is particularly useful in reaching populations that are hard to identify or access (Goodman, 1961). The inclusion criteria for participants included individuals aged 18 to 40 who had participated in or had direct knowledge of youth empowerment programs in Liberia, in both urban and rural settings.

**Data Collection Procedures and Analysis**
Rabionet (2011) emphasizes that qualitative semi-structured interview are powerful research tools that enable researchers to capture the voices of individuals and understand how they make sense of their experiences. In this study, qualitative semi-structured interview were specifically developed to gather rich, detailed responses from research participants. Twelve questions were crafted for focus group discussions (FGDs), and sixteen questions were designed for key informant interviews (KIIs).

The discussions were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data collected. These recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate a thorough analysis.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis was employed. This analytical approach involved systematically coding and categorizing the transcripts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and unique insights. The

goal was to uncover core challenges, successes, and disparities within youth empowerment programs across both urban and rural settings in Liberia.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes data set in detail. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide a detailed, nuanced account of data.

The process began with familiarization with the data, followed by the generation of initial codes. These codes were then sorted into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the data. Finally, the themes were defined and named, culminating in a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding youth empowerment initiatives in Liberia.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were paramount throughout this research process and strictly adhered to at every stage. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement, ensuring they were fully aware of the research's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. This process was crucial in maintaining transparency and respect for participants' autonomy (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to protect participants' identities. This involved anonymizing the FGD respondents, securely storing data, and ensuring that any identifying information was not disclosed. For key informants (KIs), whose identities were harder to anonymize given their identifiable roles within the Liberian context, transparency was maintained by informing them about the research objectives, methods, and the use of their information. This inherent limitation was communicated to KIs in the informed consent form and verbally during the process of obtaining informed consent. This approach helped to build trust and ensure that KIs were comfortable with the way their contributions would be used in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board for the School for International Training before the commencement of the study, underscoring the commitment to ethical research practices (Sieber, 1992).

Reflexivity was a continuous process throughout the research, allowing for transparency and self-awareness in interpreting the data. This approach helped mitigate potential biases and ensured that the researcher's perspectives did not unduly influence the findings (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity extended to the interview and FGD process, where cultural sensitivity was prioritized to create a respectful and understanding environment for participants (Hsiung, 2008).

The recruitment process also adhered to ethical standards, emphasizing the importance of a low-key approach to maintain privacy. Stakeholders involved in recruitment received briefings on the importance of not disclosing participant identities. Participants were thoroughly briefed about the FGDs, their objectives, and the measures in place to safeguard privacy and confidentiality. This included signing a group agreement to uphold these standards (Miller & Bell, 2002).

Additionally, measures were put in place to ensure the psychological well-being of participants. Support was provided for those who might find discussing certain topics distressing, and participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences (Kvale, 2007).

**Limitations of the Study**

This study faced several anticipated limitations, including time constraints, potential response bias, and limited generalizability beyond the Liberian context due to its country-specific focus.

To address time constraints, the research project strategically managed time by prioritizing key activities, establishing realistic timelines, and efficiently allocating resources. A detailed project timeline was developed to ensure that each phase of the research was completed within the allotted time frame. This approach minimized the impact of time constraints on the study's outcomes by allowing for careful planning and execution of each research activity.

Potential response bias was mitigated through transparency in communication with participants. Participants were briefed about the study's objectives, procedures, and the importance of providing honest and accurate responses. Additionally, assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were provided to create a safe environment for participants to share their true experiences and opinions without fear of

repercussion. This approach aimed to build trust and encourage openness among participants, thereby reducing the likelihood of biased responses.

Regarding limited generalizability, the study acknowledged that its findings were inherently restricted to the Liberian context due to the specific socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances of the country. To address this limitation, the importance of contextualizing findings was emphasized when discussing their applicability to other settings. The study aimed to ensure an understanding of the research outcomes, highlighting the unique aspects of the Liberian context that may not be directly transferable to other regions or countries. By acknowledging these contextual differences, the study provided a clear framework for interpreting the findings within the appropriate scope.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## DATA PRESENTATION, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data collected from both Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). It is divided into two segments to systematically address the study's objectives.

The first segment focuses on the participants' demographics. This information is presented in tables and interpreted to provide the respondents' backgrounds and the nature of their engagement with the issue of youth empowerment.

The second segment presents the findings from the participants, with an analysis of each thematic area. This analysis provides a broader picture of youth empowerment programs, including their objectives, structures, appropriateness for different geographical settings, and unique challenges and prospects. This segment aims to give a comprehensive overview of how youth empowerment initiatives are perceived and implemented in various contexts.

**The Sample**

Table 1: KII Demographics

| | Rural | | | Urban | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | **Victoria Massaquoi** | **Moses Muwein** | **Massah Y. Mulbah** | **Mahammed Ghandi** | **John James** | **Daniel Johnson** |
| **Sex** | Female | Male | Female | Male | Male | Male |
| **Status** | Working | Not working | Working | Working | Working | Working |
| **Age** | N/A | 55 years | 38 | N/A | N/A | 49 years |
| **Education** | High School Graduate | Registered Nurse | High School Graduate | College Graduate | College Graduate (Master's Degree) | College Graduate (Master's Degree) |
| **Work Experience** | Have worked before in youth empowerment program | Have worked before in youth empowerment program | Have worked before in youth empowerment program | Have worked before in youth empowerment program | Have worked before in youth empowerment program | Have worked before in youth empowerment program |
| **Current** | Community | Farmer | Youth | President - | Director, | Director, |

| Occupation | Health Assistant (CHA) | | Chairlady | Liberia National Students Union (LINSU) | Youth Development, Ministry of Youth and Sport-Liberia | YMCA Technical Vocational Education/Polytechnic |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Length of Work** | 20 years working with youth empowerment program | 7 years working with youth empowerment program | 7 years working with youth empowerment program | 24 years working with youth empowerment program | 15 years working with youth empowerment program | 8 years working with youth empowerment program |
| **Nature of Employment/Salary** | US$250.00 | Prefer not to disclose my salary | US$100.00 | Prefer not to disclose my salary | Prefer not to disclose my salary | Prefer not to disclose my salary |
| **Previous Occupation** | Business | RN - Dispenser | Self Employment | Student | Student | Student |

The key informants predominantly consist of male participants, with four males and two females, suggesting a potential gender imbalance among key informants. All informants except Moses Muwein are currently employed, highlighting a high employment rate and providing relevant insights from their active engagement in their fields. Moses, who is now a farmer due to a lack of job opportunities in nursing, shares valuable perspectives on the challenges of unemployment and career transitions. He explained:

> *"I went to school to become a nurse, but because of the lack of jobs in my area of study, I had no option but to do farming. Farming is not my career, and I never intended to be a farmer, but conditions have made me become a farmer."*

Participants range in age from 38 to 55 years, indicating they are primarily mid-career to senior professionals. This age range brings substantial experience and maturity to their roles. Educational qualifications among the participants vary, with two high school graduates, one registered nurse, and three holding college degrees, including two with master's degrees. This diversity in education levels contributes to a well-rounded understanding of the issues discussed.

Distinct trends emerge between rural and urban informants in terms of work experience and current occupation. Rural informants include Moses Muwein (farmer), Victoria Massaquoi (Community Health Assistant), and Massah Y. Mulbah (Youth Chairlady), highlighting agricultural and grassroots leadership roles. Urban informants, such as Mahammed Ghandi (President of the Liberia National Students Union), Mr. John James (Director of Youth Development), and Mr. Daniel Johnson (Director of YMCA Technical Vocational Education), hold leadership and administrative positions, offering policy and advocacy perspectives.

The difference in positions and administrative roles of the Key Informants (KIs) in rural and urban areas can be attributed to the distinct socio-economic and infrastructural contexts of these regions. In rural Liberia, the daily lives of many people are closely tied to agriculture and community-based activities, which is reflected in the roles of the rural informants. For instance, Moses Muwein is a farmer, Victoria Massaquoi is a Community Health Assistant, and Massah Y. Mulbah is a Youth Chairlady. These roles highlight the emphasis on agricultural activities, grassroots leadership, and direct community engagement, which are crucial for the sustainability and development of rural areas.

In contrast, urban Liberia presents a different landscape where the complexities and challenges of daily life are shaped by a more diverse and structured social environment. Urban informants, such as Mohammed Ghandi, John James, and Daniel Johnson, occupy leadership and administrative positions that are integral to policy-making, advocacy, and the implementation of large-scale development programs. Mahammed Ghandi, the President of the Liberia National Students Union; John James, the Director of Youth Development; and Daniel Johnson, the Director of YMCA Technical Vocational Education, are involved in roles that require strategic planning, administration, and policy advocacy to address the multifaceted challenges of urban settings. These positions reflect the need for organized leadership to navigate urban areas' social and physical environments, where issues like economic hardships, infrastructure development, and social instability are prevalent.

The government's presence and operations are significantly lower in rural areas compared to urban settings. Most government operations in rural areas are conducted through local government authorities, who often lack the necessary support in terms of funding, logistics, and capacity. These leaders depend

heavily on national leaders, who are typically based in urban settings and carry out occasional monitoring. This centralized system of government results in most operations being top-down.

Additionally, in many rural areas, government functionaries are limited by bureaucratic constraints. NGOs, on the other hand, often have better access to external funding and resources, enabling them to carry out their missions more effectively. This resource advantage allows NGOs to fill the gaps left by government operations, providing essential services and support to rural communities.

Work experience among the participants varies from 7 to 24 years. Rural informants like Moses Muwein and Massah Y. Mulbah have shorter tenures of 7 years, while Victoria Massaquoi has 20 years of experience. Urban informants have moderate to extensive tenures, with Daniel Johnson at 8 years, John James at 15 years, and Mahammed Ghandi at 24 years.

While specific salary details are provided for Victoria Massaquoi (US$250.00) and Massah Y. Mulbah (US$100.00), others did not disclose their salaries. This variation highlights different economic conditions and incentives in their respective sectors. Previous occupations include roles in business, self-employment, healthcare, and student life, indicating diverse backgrounds that inform their current roles and perspectives.

**Table 2: Age Distribution of FGD Participants**

| | Rural | | Urban | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Age Group** | **FGD1** | **FGD2** | **FGD3** | **FGD4** |
| 18 – 22 | | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| 23 – 27 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 6 |
| 28 – 32 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| 33 – 37 | | 3 | 2 | |
| 38 – 42 | 1 | 2 | | 1 |
| 43 and above | | | | |

Table 2 shows the age distribution across the focus groups with most falling between the ages of 23 and 32, indicating active involvement in their communities and workforce. FGD1, a rural group, mainly

includes participants aged 28-32, , while FGD2 spans a wider age range of 18-42, reflecting diverse life stages. FGD3, representing an urban population, primarily consists of younger individuals aged 18-27, likely early-career or students, and FGD4 includes ages 23-32, with some older participants up to 42, highlighting varied experiences. This reveals rural groups have a wider age range, while urban groups concentrate younger participants, reflecting different community dynamics.

**Table 3: Sex Distribution of FGD Participants**

| Sex | FGD1 | FGD2 | FGD3 | FGD4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Female | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |

Table 3 shows the sex distribution across all focus groups with each group having an equal number of male and female participants. This ensures that both male and female perspectives are adequately represented in the discussions, allowing for an understanding of gender-specific issues and contributions.

**Table 4: Education Distribution of FGD Participants**

| | Rural | | Urban | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Education | FGD1 | FGD2 | FGD3 | FGD4 |
| High School | 10 | 9 | | 4 |
| B.Sc. | | 1 | | 1 |
| AA | | | | 1 |
| C. Certificate | | | | 2 |
| Student | | | 8 | 2 |
| Graduate student | | | 2 | |

Table 4 shows the educational backgrounds of the participants, with a strong presence of high school graduates across all focus groups. In FGD1, all participants are high school graduates. Although the primary criterion for selection was the ability to articulate opinions and not necessarily their educational background, it happens that almost all the participants selected were high school graduates. While

education helps people articulate their thoughts more confidently, valuable insights are not limited to educated individuals; rather, all participants have the opportunity to express their opinions about the issues. FGD2 predominantly comprises high school graduates with one B.Sc. holder, suggesting some diversity in educational attainment. FGD3 mainly includes students, reflecting an education-focused group likely still in their learning phase. FGD4 features a mix of high school graduates, a B.Sc. holder, AA, and C. Certificate holders, showcasing a diverse educational background that could enrich the discussions with varied perspectives.

The educational status of participants indicates a mix of similar and varying class positions. Those with higher education levels might be positioned for better economic opportunities, whereas those with only high school education or still in the educational phase may represent a broader spectrum of economic backgrounds..

**Table 5: Work Experience Distribution of FGD Participants**

| | Rural | | Urban | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work Experience** | **FGD1** | **FGD2** | **FGD3** | **FGD4** |
| Sugar Cane Farmer | 7 | | | |
| Coal Maker | 1 | | | |
| Hunter | 1 | | | |
| Teacher | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Farmer | | 8 | | |
| Not Working | | | 9 | 7 |

**Table 6: Current Occupation Distribution of FGD Participants**

| | Rural | | Urban | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Current Occupation** | **FGD1** | **FGD2** | **FGD3** | **FGD4** |
| Farmer | 7 | 6 | | |
| Coal Maker | 1 | | | |
| Hunter | 1 | | | |
| Teacher | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Student | | 3 | 9 | 5 |

| Unemployed | | | | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Table 5 and 6 show the work experience and current occupation of participants. The data reveal distinct trends among the focus groups. In rural areas the majority of the FGD participants are sugar cane farmers, with one coal maker, hunter, and teacher, indicating a group largely engaged in agricultural and manual labor occupations in rural areas. FGD2 is primarily composed of individuals involved in farming, with some engaged in teaching, reflecting a mix of agricultural and educational occupations also in rural settings. In contrast, in the urban areas the participants (in FGD3) mainly consist of students, with their current occupation reflecting their educational pursuits rather than professional engagements in urban Liberia. FGD4 includes a mix of students and teachers, showing involvement in education both as learners and educators. These variations highlight the different economic activities and professional backgrounds present in the focus groups, underscoring the diverse occupational landscapes of rural and urban settings.

The unemployed participants in the sample are predominantly found in the urban groups, particularly in FGD3 and FGD4. These unemployed participants are mainly younger individuals within the age groups of 18-27. Many of them are likely still pursuing their education or are recent graduates, which explains their current unemployment status. The transition period from education to employment often results in a temporary phase of unemployment as they search for suitable job opportunities. It is likely that their current unemployment is part of their transition to the workforce, though it is not specified if they have been previously unemployed.

Participants in rural areas (FGD1 and FGD2) predominantly work in agricultural and allied occupations such as farming, sugar cane farming, and teaching. Many of these individuals have likely remained in the same occupation over time due to the stable nature of rural economies and the limited job diversity. It appears that people in these groups have not had to change occupations frequently; if there have been changes, they are usually within the same sector, such as shifting from general farming to specific types like sugar cane farming or taking up teaching roles in addition to farming.

The data revealed that that educational status significantly shapes the occupational and income status of participants. Those with higher education levels, such as B.Sc. holders in FGD2 and FGD4, are more

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likely to secure skilled jobs like teaching. In contrast, high school graduates and those with lower educational attainment are primarily engaged in manual labor or agricultural work, reflecting the limited job opportunities available to them. In urban areas, the varied educational backgrounds show a mix of students and unemployed graduates. While education provides them with skills, the job market's capacity to absorb all educated individuals immediately is limited, resulting in a period of unemployment for some.

Urban areas often have more educational institutions, leading to a larger population of students and recent graduates who are yet to find employment. The competitive and saturated urban job market makes it harder for individuals, especially those without work experience, to secure jobs quickly. This demographic trend results in a higher number of unemployed individuals being available and participating in the focus groups. Therefore, the sample reflects the typical transitional phase of younger, educated urban residents moving from education to the workforce.

**Table 7:   Annual Income Distribution of FGD Participants**

| FGD Group | Annual Income Range (LRD) per individuals | Social Security |
|---|---|---|
| FGD1 | 30,000 - 120,000 | N/A |
| FGD2 | 25,000 - 150,000 | N/A |
| FGD3 | 5,000 - 10,000 | N/A |
| FGD4 | 10,000 - 11,000 | N/A |

Table 7 shows the income distribution per individuals, reflecting the diverse economic conditions of the participants. In FGD1, annual incomes range from 30,000 to 120,000 LRD, highlighting variations even within similar occupations. FGD2 participants have a wider income range from 25,000 to 150,000 LRD, indicating significant economic diversity within the group. FGD3 participants, primarily students, have lower incomes ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 LRD. FGD4 participants have a slightly higher income range of 10,000 to 11,000 LRD, reflecting occupations that offer somewhat better pay but still within a limited range. The lack of social security across all focus groups indicates a common challenge in ensuring economic stability and protection for participants, highlighting the need for policies and programs that can provide social security benefits to improve the livelihood and security of the working population.

**Key Findings**

The data gathered from Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) provided insights into youth empowerment programs. KII participants answered 16 questions, while FGD participants responded to 12 questions, with responses organized into six thematic areas.

The first thematic area explores the experiences of both KII and FGD participants, offering a practical view of youth empowerment programs in different settings. Participants shared their firsthand experiences, highlighting the successes and challenges they encountered.

The second theme focuses on strategies for effective youth empowerment in urban and rural contexts. It emphasizes the need for tailored approaches, with participants discussing various strategies that have proven effective in their specific contexts.

The third identifies effective empowerment programs for rural and urban youth. Participants distinguished between the needs and opportunities in these settings, identifying programs that are particularly beneficial for youth empowerment in each context.

The fourth theme discusses the challenges faced by youth empowerment programs in both urban and rural areas. Participants detailed the unique obstacles that hinder the success of these programs, providing a clear understanding of the difficulties encountered.

The fifth theme addresses the challenges faced by young women in accessing educational, empowerment, and employment opportunities. Participants highlighted gender-specific barriers, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to overcome these challenges.

The sixth examines the role of collaborations in youth empowerment. Participants emphasized the importance of cross-sectoral collaborations among stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of youth empowerment initiatives. They discussed the benefits of integrated approaches and the potential for partnerships to leverage resources and achieve greater impact.

**Experiences of KII Participants in Youth Empowerment Programs**

All KII participants said that they had implemented some form of empowerment program for young people with different experience levels, ranging from 7 to 24 years. The three rural informants (Victoria et al., 2024) shared different perspectives based on their experiences.

Victoria, the first KII participant, has 20 years of experience working with youth empowerment programs in various areas such as health awareness, microfinance for youth, and agriculture. She specifically mentioned a microfinance program she implemented for 150 youths in the Salayea district. The program had both successes and challenges; the majority of participants who took loans from the microfinance program were able to establish their own agricultural enterprises in vegetable production, poultry, and cassava, while others established mini shops to sell provisions. She made a mention of one particular participant, Lorpu.  She said,

> *"Lorpu was one of the most successful beneficiary of our microfinance program. Lorpu started up with a very small loan and started selling children clothes and eventually changed the business and started supplying agriculture tools for oil and today she has a big store in Zorzor" (Victoria, 2024)*

Despite these successes, according to Victoria, some participants did not repay their loans, causing setbacks for the program. Although she did not provide any figures, she mentioned several reasons for this issue. She identified lapses in the administration and management of the loan program, including inadequate tracking of loan repayments, insufficient follow-up with beneficiaries, inadequate financial literacy training, insufficient business support, and lack of clear repayment schedules. Additionally, family pressure to use the loan funds for immediate household needs rather than for the intended business or project purposes led to difficulties in generating sufficient income to repay the loans.

Moses, the second KII, explained that he had been involved with implementing youth projects under Plan International.  PLAN INTERNATIONAL is an international humanitarian organization that started working in Liberia in 1981 and resumed operations in 2007 after the Second Civil War. Plan International focuses on advancing children's rights and equality for girls (Plan International, 2024). Moses worked with Plan from 2010 to 2013 as a dispenser, distributing contraceptives and condoms to

young people in schools and conducting community awareness about family planning and prevention. Moses emphasized the importance of health awareness among young people:

> *"I realized that a lot of the young ladies in the community were getting pregnant, especially unwanted pregnancies, so I helped to give them family planning medication to prevent early childbirth or teenage pregnancy. At first, it was difficult to get them to come for the preventive drugs, but after some time, when they saw their friends preventing unwanted pregnancies, most of them started coming willingly" (Moses, 2024).*

Massah, with 13 years of experience, started implementing youth programs as a student leader in high school and now serves as the Youth Chairlady for Salayea District. She educates young people about forest management and biodiversity maintenance. Massah believes that young people are the future of their natural inheritance and must ensure that the future is secured. Massah said,

> *"Amid unprecedented natural disasters, including climate change and global warming, if we do not stand up as youth, our future will be bleak. So, I inform young people to get involved in sustainable farming practices, avoid cutting forests, and protect natural species, especially endangered ones. Moreover, to some extent, it is succeeding because the number of forest farming activities is gradually reducing compared to previous years" (Massah, 2024).*

Though Massah did not provide figures to support her claim of a reduction in forest farming, she explained how she determined there was a decrease in both forest farming and hunting of natural species. She and her team have been monitoring the region for some time, specifically referencing four spots in the Salayea District forest region where farming had been conducted prior to their awareness and engagement efforts. Since their engagement with the community about sustainable farming, those areas have not been farmed, which she believes is a significant success factor.

When asked how she funds these monitoring activities, Massah explained that her staff operates entirely on a voluntary basis without any support from the national government or international organizations. This commitment stems from their dedication to enhancing nature conservation, promoting biodiversity, and taking action against climate change. Massah's story of support and project sustainability mirrors the challenges faced by many local organizations across the country that struggle with financial and logistical constraints. Despite their substantial efforts, organizations like Massah's often lack the

financial and logistical support necessary for sustained operations. Additionally, they may not have the capacity training required to secure funding from international entities such as the World Bank, the United Nations, the European Union, and other major organizations, which are more accessible to those in urban settings.

From these three experiences, Victoria and Massah have a shared focus on agriculture, although Victoria also mentioned business aspects related to agricultural empowerment. Moses's experience differs slightly as it focuses on health awareness for rural youth.

The urban KII participants shared different experiences with many similarities in programs ranging from initiatives like the National Youth Task Force against COVID-19 and the National Youth and Student Summit to the National Cadet Program and the National Youth Service Program, computer literacy programs, and the Youth Opportunity Project. These programs operate at the national level.

Mohammed, the President of the Liberia National Students Union, coordinates all student groups across Liberia's 15 political subdivisions with sub-offices in various counties. With 24 years of experience, he has implemented several programs, including the National Youth Task Force against COVID-19, which aims to educate young people about the dangers of COVID-19 and preventive measures, and the National Youth and Student Summit, sponsored by the Liberian government, which brings students together annually to discuss resolutions in education, empowerment, employment, and health.

Daniel from the YMCA and James from the Ministry of Youth and Sports shared different experiences regarding the programs and projects their institutions run. James, the Director of Youth Development, has oversight responsibilities to ensure that national programs benefit young people. He mentioned the Youth Opportunity Project, which aims to increase access to income-generation opportunities for young people in Liberia. The project uses a community-based productive inclusion approach to provide economic and empowerment opportunities for youth living in both urban and rural areas. He also mentioned the Temporary Employment Program, which aims to create short-term employment opportunities for vulnerable individuals in slum communities. James emphasized that programs like these provide job experience, skills development, and income support for young individuals, helping them transition into the workforce. James said,

*"This program has made a significant impact in some communities across Liberia, but there still remain challenges, especially with funding support. We hope to source additional funding to continue implementing these kinds of programs that help our youth transition into the national workforce." (James, 2024)*

Daniel, for his part, mentioned that the YMCA is also involved with the Youth Opportunity Project, funded by the World Bank and implemented by the YMCA. He highlighted his seven years of experience as Director of the YMCA Polytechnic College, where he manages the institution's day-to-day operations.

**Experiences of FGD Participants in Youth Empowerment Programs**

Across the four FGDs, there were differing experiences from rural to urban areas. Most rural youth had no idea of any empowerment programs in their area. In the first focus group in Telemai, of the 10 participants, only one had experience with a youth empowerment program. He said:

*"I participated in the GTZ vocational program in 2008 and I learned carpentry for nine months. Unfortunately, since my graduation, I have not put the training to use."*

He further admitted that this was not his interest but attended the training because the sponsor was giving monthly allowances and providing free food.

A similar experience was shared in the second FGD in Gorlu. Out of the 10 participants, only two have benefited from a training program in soap making sponsored by USAID and general agriculture training provided by the Tumutu Agriculture Training (TAT) sponsored by the Liberian Government. The USAID participant said,

"I have been able to put my skills to use since I graduated in 2014. As a result of the training, today I am managing my own business producing soap. I am the only soap maker in this town and I am currently training people how to make soap."

She expressed that it is her passion that makes her successful and that soap making is one of the appropriate businesses for rural communities.

For the FGD participants in urban areas, participants admitted to participating in several empowerment programs. Three out of ten participants in the 3rd FGD in Don Bosco Community said that they had participated in a training program conducted by USAID called the Accelerated Quality Education (AQE), which aims to educate young people about how to maintain personal hygiene. Three participants also participated in training sponsored by Action Aid Liberia, which aims to help young women and children with their rights and addresses sexual gender-based violence. Four benefitted from scholarships and tuition aid to attend high school and university sponsored by Samaritan's Purse, a nondenominational evangelical Christian organization providing spiritual and physical aid to people around the world.

Almost all the participants in the 4th FGD in Wood Camp participated in different youth training and empowerment programs. These included conflict resolution skills among young people and adults sponsored by the Kofi Annan Peace and Transformation Program, peer mediation and counselling sponsored by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the UNMIL Quick Impact Project on Sanitation aimed at educating young people on sanitation and encouraging them to clean their surroundings.

Additionally, participants shared their experiences in various other youth empowerment programs. Computer literacy training from YMCA, the UNCOR Program trained young people in various capacity-building skills such as catering, carpentry, electricity, plumbing, cosmetology, and more. The Counseling Program by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) focused on reforming vulnerable young people through counseling, and the DDRR Program aimed at demobilization, disarmament, rehabilitation, and reintegration.

The key differences between rural and urban FGDs in terms of youth empowerment programs are evident in awareness, participation, diversity of programs, support from larger organizations, and success in implementation. Rural areas show limited access and awareness, with programs focusing on basic vocational skills and practical economic activities. In contrast, urban areas have a higher engagement rate, diverse program offerings, and better support structures, leading to more effective implementation and broader impact on youth empowerment. These differences underscore the need for

tailored approaches to youth empowerment that address the specific challenges and opportunities in rural and urban settings.

**Strategies for Effective Youth Empowerment in Urban and Rural Contexts**

KII participants highlighted several key lessons learned from delivering youth empowerment projects, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches based on the unique contexts of urban and rural settings. For instance, in urban settings, a successful approach could involve partnering with local businesses to provide internships and job opportunities, while in rural settings, a successful approach could involve providing agricultural training and resources. These lessons can be attributed as major strategic factors to consider when designing youth employment programs for rural and urban settings.

Victoria and Moses noted that "continuous encouragement", a process of providing ongoing support, feedback, and motivation to participants, is crucial for maintaining participant engagement. Victoria explained that most programs are not sustained because project implementers do not provide adequate monitoring and support. This includes the provision of seeds, farming tools, or financial support for small businesses to ensure participants can implement what they have learned. She emphasized the importance of startup packages to help participants apply their skills effectively. She also mentioned that monitoring should be done to ensure that these materials are maintained. She also noted that project implementers or donors are often not patient, prioritizing timelines over successes. Victoria shared her experience with a microfinance project:

> *"The microfinance project succeeded to some extent because of the encouragement we gave the beneficiaries and the constant monitoring we put in place. We set a meeting time every week on Wednesdays to listen to all beneficiaries' progress and reports, and we did that for several years. Wherever there were needs for support, like providing tools and equipment, we provided it, thus making those projects successful."*

Moses emphasized that health awareness is very relevant in youth programs. He highlighted that without good health and sound minds, it is difficult for young people, especially those in rural areas, to face growing challenges:

*"Most times donors and projects fail to capture the issue of health and personal hygiene, family planning, and preventive healthcare to improve participants' health. These health issues include but are not limited to, reproductive health, mental health, nutrition, and hygiene."*

He mentioned a family planning initiative implemented by Plan International, which included distributing contraceptives and raising awareness about health. He noted that this initiative helped young people learn to plan their families and prevent unwanted pregnancies and other STIs and STDs.

Massah stressed the importance of involving local community leaders and members in the planning and implementing programs to ensure relevance and sustainability. Their involvement can range from providing insights into the community's needs and aspirations, to mobilizing resources and support, to monitoring and evaluating the program's progress. She shared her experience in forest management advocacy:

*"It is difficult to succeed in any development if you don't involve the people. The community wants to be heard and recognized, and giving them such recognition is important for the success of projects and programs. Today, many community members are now serving as 'forest police', a term used to describe community members who are vigilant in reporting any unusual activities in the forest, thus contributing to the sustainability of the forest management program."*

She also mentioned the importance of respecting cultural norms and including them in advocacy and program implementation:

*"This should not only be about forest management awareness; it should extend across all programs implemented to develop our community. If we want them to succeed, we must always consult with traditional people and elders."*

James mentioned that youth empowerment projects need to be organized to capture young people's interest. He emphasized that programs should be appealing, relevant, and engaging to the target audience, considering young people's preferences, needs, and aspirations. Activities and initiatives should resonate with their experiences and goals. James also stressed the importance of understanding and addressing underlying issues that affect young people, such as street involvement, drug use, and

commercial sex work, which can be significant barriers to effective participation and success in empowerment programs. He noted:

> *"I have observed that urban youth face more intense peer pressure and exposure to street culture, while rural youth might struggle with different social dynamics and economic pressures such as family pressure and cultural challenges."*

He called for a holistic approach to address the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by youth, which might include providing support services, counselling, and interventions aimed at mitigating the impact of these issues:

> *"Many young people in urban areas face significant barriers to employment, including a lack of work experience and relevant skills. Programs like the National Cadet Program, a government initiative that provides young people with structured training and work experience, and the National Youth Service Program, a community service program that offers young people the opportunity to develop leadership skills and contribute to their communities, directly address these barriers by providing structured opportunities to gain experience and skills."*

Daniel highlighted the importance of providing practical support alongside training programs, ongoing monitoring, and tailored program design. This practical support could include resources such as startup packages, access to markets, or technical assistance. He emphasized that combining training with these resources is essential for enabling participants to apply their skills effectively. This approach is particularly relevant in rural areas where economic activities like agriculture can significantly benefit from practical support:

> *"It is one thing to train, and it is another thing to put into practice what one learns."*

Daniel noted that rural areas often face more significant challenges regarding limited infrastructure, resources, and service provision than urban areas. These challenges can include inadequate road networks, electricity, communication facilities, and educational institutions, which can hinder the delivery and impact of youth empowerment programs. For instance, the lack of educational institutions

can limit the access of rural youth to quality education and skills training, which are crucial for their empowerment and economic development.

The discussions from the focus group discussions (FGDs) regarding strategies for effective youth empowerment in urban and rural contexts highlighted several critical needs for tailored approaches when designing youth empowerment programs. Participants consistently emphasized that the types of programs that are most effective vary significantly between urban and rural areas, reflecting the distinct socio-economic contexts and opportunities available in each setting.

Among rural youth participants in FGDs 1 and 2, the emphasis was on agricultural support, including acquiring agricultural knowledge. Out of the 20 participants in the FGDs held in Telemai and Gorlu, 18 mentioned agriculture training and support as the primary tailored program that can be sustained. One participant from the Gorlu FGD shared:

> *"The TAT program taught me effective agricultural practices, which helped me increase my yield and income. Currently, I have my cocoa and palm farms, and they are doing excellently well. A lot of people struggle with the management, maintenance, and production of cocoa and palm because they lack the technical know-how, but I have the skills, so I am doing well with my farms."*

The issue of support for agricultural productivity was a major concern, with all participants mentioning the need for material support to enable their involvement in agricultural activities.

Another frequently mentioned program by participants was weaving and tailoring. Out of the 20 participants in the two FGDs, 19 spoke of skills in weaving and tailoring as sustainable income opportunities in rural areas. They believe that these skills enable youth to start small businesses catering to local markets. One participant noted:

> *"If we learn skills in tailoring and weaving, we will be able to create products that are in demand locally, providing a steady income. If donors provide skills training in tailoring and weaving, youth in rural areas like here will be able to make their own money."*

The third strategic area that emerged across all FGDs was general building construction skills in masonry, carpentry, and plumbing. Participants believed that these skills would enable them to rebuild their damaged houses. One participant remarked:

> "Since the war ended, we haven't been able to properly rebuild our houses because we do not have many builders in this area. If we want to build, we have to go to Guinea to hire people. Having building construction trade skills will be very good for us here."

Other trades mentioned by rural FGD participants included soap making and computer skills. One participant in the Gorlu FGD mentioned learning soap making from a USAID program, which helped her open her own business and teach others the skill. She made another statement,

> *"The soap making training has helped me a lot because through that, I have been able to open my own business, and people come to me to buy soap. I am the only soap maker in this community, and I also help teach others how to make soap."*

Participants also emphasized the need for financial and material support, such as money and training equipment like sewing machines, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, and other agricultural tools, to help them establish small businesses and farms. They are very insightful about their needs, unanimously articulating the need for training, equipment, and support for agricultural work. This work produces items of local everyday consumption that enable them to earn steady money but also contribute to the community's everyday life.

Victoria from the Key Informant Interviews (KII) mentioned a successful microloan program in Telemai, suggesting that microloans and village savings could empower young people to establish small businesses and support farming initiatives.

In urban areas, FGDs conducted in Donbosco and Wood Camp revealed that participants had benefited from empowerment programs, including scholarships, financial aid, psychosocial skills, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and computer literacy. They believed that providing education and financial support

were the best strategies for youth empowerment. Out of 20 participants in both Donbosco and Wood Camp, 18 mentioned the importance of educational support through scholarships and financial aid to attend school and vocational training programs in areas like computer skills, electricity, plumbing, and small business management. One participant shared:

> *"I graduated from the YMCA vocational training program and learned small business management skills. I was given financial support by the YMCA to establish my money transfer business. I started with just $200 and today I have a profit margin of $1,000 every month."*

Another participant added:

> *"I learned how to repair phones at the Donbosco Trade School, and after graduation, I started repairing phones on the street. Today, I have my own phone repair shop, and it earns me around $500 in profit every month."*

**Effective Empowerment Programs for Urban and Rural Youth**

In this section, participants shared their views on the most effective empowerment programs for urban and rural contexts. The perspectives from Key Informant Interviews (KII) revealed distinct differences between rural and urban settings, highlighting the need for tailored approaches.

**Rural Empowerment Programs**

All three rural KII participants emphasized the importance of agriculture, tailoring, weaving, village savings and microfinance, and health services programs. Among these, agriculture was the most frequently discussed. Participants highlighted that they possess the necessary land resources for agriculture but lack essential equipment such as tractors, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, wheelbarrows, and seeds. One participant stated:

> *"We have everything it takes to make agriculture a reality. The only problem we may have will be the necessary equipment such as agricultural tools to make our farms."*

Participants believe that agriculture can produce enough food for both consumption and commercial purposes. Selling surplus produce could generate income to support their children's education. They emphasized the need for agricultural training for youth. One participant noted:

> *"If our youth are trained in different methods of agriculture, like testing soil, planting and managing crops, and selecting which crops grow where and why, and given the necessary support, we can succeed in agriculture. We need agriculture training."*

Another participant mentioned the importance of providing village savings and microloans to local farmers and creating market spaces for them to sell their products. They emphasized the need for better roads to boost agricultural productivity and highlighted the role of health education in supporting agricultural success:

> *"When you are sick, you cannot work, so it is good to also provide health education to the people so they know how to take care of themselves to remain healthy for a more successful program in a challenging environment."*

Health was emphasized as an essential component of youth empowerment, highlighting the need for a robust and comprehensive approach.

Soap making was also identified as an effective program for rural communities, with a success story from a participant in Gorlu who learned the skill from a USAID program and now runs a successful soap-making business.

**Urban Empowerment Programs**

When discussing programs best suited for urban youth, KII participants identified technical vocational education and training (TVET) in computer literacy and IT technology, auto mechanics, electricity, peace and advocacy programs, business and entrepreneurship, and psychosocial counselling. Computer literacy and IT technology were most emphasized due to their relevance in urban job markets. Participants stressed that these skills are essential for making youth marketable. They also emphasized that training should be matched with employability:

*"Almost everything that is done in an urban setting is driven by computer and IT technology. Having these programs in urban settings inspires young people to acquire skills that can make them marketable."*

One KII participant also highlighted auto mechanics as an essential trade for urban settings, noting that most vehicles are concentrated in cities:

*"Automachanic is very important. Most of the vehicles people use are found in the city and urban areas, so learning auto mechanics is best fitted because graduates will easily find jobs. Industries and factories, mostly in urban areas, will always need auto mechanics."*

Business and entrepreneurship were also frequently mentioned. Participants believe that these programs align well with urban settings. One KII participant shared success stories of beneficiaries who now run their businesses:

*"Some of our beneficiaries who did business entrepreneurship currently have their own businesses. Some are in money and microfinance, and others run computer and phone repair shops. Mixing trade with business ensures success."*

Agriculture was least mentioned by urban KII participants, with only one participant acknowledging it but pointing out the challenges of practicing agriculture in urban areas due to limited land space:

*"Agriculture is not a bad thing, but where will one do agriculture in the city? There is no land space here compared to rural areas, so I suggest those interested in agriculture move to rural areas where there is enough land."*

Regarding the best-fitted programs for rural and urban areas, there were diverse views among the rural and urban FGD participants. When asked about the most suitable programs for rural youth empowerment, several programs were named across the two FGDs in Telemai and Gorlu. These included agriculture, weaving, tailoring, soap making, and construction in carpentry and masonry. Among these, agriculture was mentioned by all participants as the most frequent and appropriate

program for rural youth. This was followed by construction in masonry and carpentry, mentioned by 15 participants. The third most frequently mentioned programs were tailoring and weaving, cited by 10 participants.

Participants frequently mentioned agriculture because they have the land necessary for farming. The only challenge they identified was the lack of tools and equipment such as water machines, cutlasses, hoes, shovels, and tractors needed to make their agricultural businesses successful. One participant said:

> *"Agriculture is the best for us here. If our youth are trained in agriculture and know the technical know-how, they will help the community produce high yields. Through this, we will be able to sell the surplus of our food to get money for our children's education, take care of our health needs, and other things necessary for life. So we need agriculture as number one."*

Construction was also mentioned by 15 of the FGD participants. They said that construction was important for their youth because they are still building their houses since the war. One participant remarked:

> *"Most of the houses built here are constructed by people from Guinea. Sometimes they charge us very expensively because we do not have our own Liberians in the construction field. If we train more youth in construction, they will help us build our houses."*

Tailoring, tie and dye, and weaving were the third most frequently mentioned programs among rural participants. They see tailoring, tie and dye, and weaving as very important industries, especially for women and girls.

When asked about the best-fitted programs for urban youth, FGD participants mentioned programs including driving, electricity, plumbing, catering, interior decoration, cosmetology, auto mechanics, and microfinance. Among these, computer literacy and IT were frequently mentioned by 15 participants, followed by auto mechanics mentioned by 12 participants. Electricity and plumbing were the third most frequently stated, mentioned by 9 participants. The rest were mentioned by 2 to 4 participants, including catering, interior decoration, and cosmetology.

Participants stressed the importance of computer literacy programs and IT, noting that the world is becoming increasingly complex and challenging. They emphasized that learning computer and IT skills is essential to being marketable and successful in today's job market.

**Challenges Faced by Youth Empowerment Programs in Urban and Rural Areas**

When discussing the challenges faced by youth empowerment programs in urban and rural areas, participants from both Key Informant Interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) highlighted distinct and context-specific obstacles.

All three rural KII participants pointed out that cultural beliefs and practices often hinder the effectiveness of youth empowerment programs. Traditional views can resist new ideas, as exemplified by the taboo against using latrines in some communities. One participant shared:

> *"We built a latrine in one of our communities, and the people refused to use it because they felt it was a taboo to use the latrines. The building stayed in that community and spoiled."*

Though rural Key Informants (KIIs) believed that the use of latrines was taboo, there could have been several other reasons why residents refused to use them. Local residents resisted using the latrines because they were built in open areas where everyone could see who goes in and comes out. Traditional beliefs often dictate that anything related to using the bathroom or going to the toilet should be done in private. Therefore, to encourage usage, latrines in rural communities should be built in more secluded, private locations.

This scenario highlights the importance of inclusivity in development projects, especially those that benefit end-users. The approach to latrine usage in rural areas differs from that in urban settings. For a development project to gain acceptance, it is crucial to consult the beneficiaries during planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. If the community had been consulted about the construction and benefits of the latrines, there would likely have been suggestions on how and where they should be built. This serves as a lesson for all development partners, especially implementers, that project planning should involve the beneficiaries. Their input can ensure the project meets their needs and maximizes sustainable usage.

Participants emphasized that failing to involve local community leaders and elders in project planning and management poses significant challenges. Engaging these leaders can facilitate community acceptance and support for the programs. One participant noted:

> *"The first step in community development planning, including youth programs, is to first meet the community leaders and let them tell you what they want and try to get them involved as much as possible."*

Other challenges identified by rural KIIs included the remoteness of rural communities, which leads to logistical challenges such as transportation, connectivity, and access to markets and services. Overcoming these barriers requires innovative approaches like mobile outreach, community-based extension services, and partnerships with local institutions and businesses.

Urban KII participants identified urbanization and high population density as significant challenges. These factors lead to intense competition for limited resources and opportunities. Inadequate funding, limited educational facilities, and insufficient community support systems were commonly mentioned. Participants stressed the need for better resource allocation and support systems. Urban youth face significant social pressures, including peer influence towards negative behaviors such as substance abuse and delinquency. The high cost of living in urban areas, including expenses for transportation, accommodation, and food, poses a barrier to youth empowerment. Participants suggested that establishing partnerships and collaboration across various sectors could help fill these gaps. Urban KII participants highlighted the importance of effective policy implementation and regular monitoring. One participant remarked:

> *"A lot of policy documents have been crafted, but the implementation has been a problem. To make policy implementation effective, policymakers, including the government and NGOs, should regularly check their plans to know which are effective and which are not."*

Rural FGD participants frequently mentioned the lack of financial support as significant challenge. They emphasized the need for financial aid to support their educational and entrepreneurial endeavors. Sexual exploitation was a significant concern among rural FGD participants, who called for increased

awareness and the enforcement of laws to protect young people from abuse. The absence of qualified teachers and quality education hampers the development of rural youth. Participants also mentioned the lack of access to the internet as a barrier to education. Early marriage and lack of parental support were highlighted as challenges that need addressing through community awareness and legal enforcement.

Urban FGD participants also identified sexual exploitation as a major issue, similar to rural areas. They suggested that the government enforce national laws to curb this problem. Participants mentioned the high cost of accommodation, including feeding, rent, and transportation, as significant challenges. They proposed government loans for career advancement and consistent awareness campaigns on the dangers of drug abuse. Peer pressure and the lack of financial support were noted as barriers to youth empowerment in urban settings. Providing guidance counseling and financial aid were suggested solutions.

**Challenges Faced by Young Women**

When rural KII participants were asked about the challenges young women face in accessing educational, empowerment, and employment opportunities, several recurring themes emerged. All three KII participants listed early marriage, lack of parental support, lack of funding, sexual exploitation, bribery, lack of quality skills to compete, lack of interest due to societal beliefs and biases, lack of mentorship, limited access to opportunities, shyness, and family pressure as major challenges. Among these, early marriage, sexual exploitation, and lack of interest based on societal beliefs and biases were strongly mentioned by all participants. One participant noted:

> *"Women continue to suffer in a male-dominated society. A lot of men think that women are weak vessels and they are always looked down upon by their male counterparts. As a result, most women feel that even if they are smart, robust, and capable, they will not be given the chance."*

To overcome these challenges, participants suggested that there should be massive awareness campaigns in various communities about women's education. They emphasized that the national government should develop strong policies against sexual abuse and make loans available for women's education and

empowerment. They also advocated for mandatory laws to create slots for women to benefit from all programs on a 50-50 basis.

Urban KII participants identified several challenges affecting women's participation in education, empowerment, and employment. These include lack of support leading to higher dropout rates compared to males, gender-based discrimination manifesting in limited access to education, lower employment opportunities, and unequal participation in empowerment programs. Deep-rooted societal norms, cultural practices, and patriarchal structures contribute to the marginalization of women and girls, hindering their ability to fully realize their potential and participate in decision-making processes. Other challenges mentioned include teenage pregnancy, lack of awareness, cultural barriers, mobility constraints, and inadequate support services tailored to their needs. Among these challenges, gender-based discrimination, cultural practices and patriarchal structures, and teenage pregnancy were frequently mentioned. One participant explained:

*"One major challenge facing women is the prolonged mindset of men and society against women. From long-standing traditional notions, they feel that women belong to the back and should be the ones to take care of the home, cook, do laundry, take care of the children, and manage the home. As a result, our women feel shy and always sit at the back, not because they are weak, but because they are disappointed in what has been happening to them."*

To address these challenges, urban KII participants emphasized the need for targeted interventions that address the root causes of gender inequality and empower young women to realize their full potential. This includes promoting girls' education, providing skills training and entrepreneurship support, combating gender-based violence through policy implementation, promoting women's leadership and participation in decision-making, and implementing policies and programs that promote gender equality and social inclusion at all levels of society.

Rural FGD participants echoed similar challenges that hinder women empowerment programs in Liberia, including early marriage, sexual exploitation, lack of parental support, lack of support from male partners, lack of self-esteem, female genital mutilation, child care responsibilities, and cultural norms. Among these challenges, early marriage, lack of self-esteem, and lack of support from male

partners were the most pressing issues discussed by all participants. One participant shared her personal experience:

> "I am a direct victim of early marriage. I was in the seventh grade when I got pregnant and could not continue my education. I had to sit out for almost five years before I resumed school after my son was born. This really set back my education. When I went back to school, I already had a responsibility to take care of my son and, at the same time, sponsor my high school education all by myself. Since that time, my life has always been a struggle and I am still trying to overcome."

Urban FGD participants' responses and experiences were similar to those of rural FGD participants. However, four urban participants specifically mentioned a lack of interest in science courses, lack of quality education for competition, and lack of self-esteem as additional challenges. Urban KII participants believe that these issues are significant barriers to women's and girls' education, empowerment, and employment.

**Role of Collaborations in Youth Empowerment**

When asked about the roles of cross-sectoral collaboration among stakeholders in youth empowerment, there were similarities and differing views across the Key Informant Interviews (KII) in both rural and urban settings. Rural KII participants emphasized the value of collaboration between NGOs and the community. They argued that tangible results in youth empowerment are more likely when NGOs work closely with the community. One of the KII participants noted:

> "The international and national NGOs have made a lot of mistakes in the past. They have always planned projects and programs and taken them to the community without getting community inputs. As a result, those projects have been seen as foreign to the citizens, so when they leave, the projects become useless. If we are to achieve youth development, we want the NGOs to come and sit with the community to decide on their needs and how they can do it to maximize results."

All three rural KII participants also mentioned duplication as a major issue in collaboration. They believe that the lack of coordination leads to duplication of efforts, which hinders the success of projects

and programs. They maintained that collaboration should involve all stakeholders in project planning, management, and evaluation to avoid redundancy and ensure efficiency.

Urban KII participants also stressed the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly among government and development partners. They emphasized that collaboration among development partners can bring integrated approaches to address the multifaceted needs of young people. One participant provided an example of beneficial cross-sectoral collaboration:

> *"I think it is important for development partners like the ministries of education, health, youth and sports, and agriculture to work together. The youth would identify their needs through the Ministry of Youth and Sports. If it is an educational, agricultural, or health need, then they can contact the relevant ministries for collaboration. This way, youth and sports can work with education, health, and agriculture to holistically address the needs and avoid duplication of programs, yielding more fruitful results."*

Another point highlighted by urban KII participants was that cross-sectoral collaborations can optimize resources by pooling expertise, funding, and infrastructure from different sectors. Daniel, one of the KII participants, emphasized the potential for partnerships to leverage complementary strengths and achieve greater impact in youth development initiatives.

Both rural and urban FGD participants mentioned the importance of sincerity, accountability, transparency, trust, and having a proper exit plan. All rural FGD participants emphasized the need for a proper exit plan. They felt that there has never been a properly executed exit plan for youth projects. They lamented that to ensure project sustainability, beneficiaries should be empowered with the technical know-how and strategies so that when donors leave, the projects can be maintained.

Urban FGD participants highlighted issues of sincerity, accountability, transparency, and trust. Four out of 20 spoke of sincerity and transparency, while six out of 20 mentioned trust and accountability. They felt that most donors have not been transparent about the funds they are using for the projects, making it difficult to trust them. They also felt that donors only report back to their back donors and not to the community about how the project funds are used. One participant stated:

*"If the donors are really serious and want to ensure that programs have a tangible impact on their beneficiaries, let them begin telling us how much money they received from wherever they got it and how much is going to administration and how much is going to investment in training and support, and report back to us about the outline. When this begins to happen, I am convinced that projects, including those that affect youth, will be sustainable."*

# CHAPTER FIVE
## ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter provides a summary of the research findings, discussing and analyzing their implications in the context of youth empowerment in urban and rural Liberia. It also offers recommendations for future programs and policy considerations, followed by a conclusion summarizing the key insights of the study.

## Discussion and Analysis of the Findings

The study explored various youth empowerment programs and their effectiveness in urban and rural settings in Liberia. Key findings from this study suggest that youth empowerment programs must address the unique needs and opportunities of their respective environments. Across the different interviews conducted in both rural and urban areas, there were differing views and opinions about youth empowerment programs, based on the participants' experiences and the social and economic contexts of these areas. Therefore, effective youth empowerment programs must be tailored to these contexts.

## Rural Context

Throughout the interviews, agricultural training and support, as well as vocational training, were identified as critical for rural youth. The enthusiasm for agricultural programs, particularly the TAT program, underscores the potential for such initiatives to transform rural economies. The tangible benefits of practical agricultural training enhance productivity, provide a stable income, and instill confidence in the effectiveness of these programs. As one participant said, "The TAT program taught me effective agricultural practices, which helped me increase my yield and income." This success story highlights agriculture as a primary focus for rural youth empowerment.

Additionally, vocational skills in trades like weaving, tailoring, soap making, and construction are crucial for youth empowerment programs. These skills enable youth to start small businesses and contribute to the local economy. The need for material support, such as tools and equipment, was a recurring theme, indicating that resource provision is essential for the success of these programs.

Furthermore, Moses's emphasis on health awareness programs, particularly in family planning, highlights the importance of addressing health issues to ensure productivity and well-being.

Incorporating health education into youth empowerment initiatives can enhance overall program effectiveness by promoting healthier, more productive lifestyles among young people.

**Urban Context**

Urban participants emphasized educational support and financial literacy. They mentioned that scholarships and vocational training in high-demand fields such as computer literacy, small business management, and technical trades (e.g., electricity, plumbing, and auto mechanics) are vital for the social and economic stability of urban youth. Financial support mechanisms, including microloans, play a critical role in empowering urban youth to start and sustain their own businesses. As one participant noted, "I graduated from the YMCA vocational training program and learned small business management skills. I was given financial support by the YMCA to establish my money transfer business." The success stories from urban participants underscore the importance of comprehensive support systems. These systems combine education, skills training, and financial assistance, demonstrating the need for a holistic approach to urban youth empowerment.

**Success Factors**

The study highlights several key factors that contribute to the success of programs aimed at youth empowerment. Firstly, community involvement is crucial, as engaging communities in program design and implementation fosters buy-in, trust, and sustainability. Adequate funding and resources are also essential, ensuring programs can cover materials, staffing, and operational costs for smooth implementation and long-term viability. Capacity building plays a critical role, empowering local personnel and communities through training in project management, financial literacy, and technical skills, enhancing sustainability and program effectiveness.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation, allowing programs to track progress, identify challenges, and make necessary adjustments for ongoing effectiveness and responsiveness to evolving needs. Adopting a holistic approach is important, addressing multiple dimensions of well-being such as health, education, and economic development for more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes. Adapting these programs across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts requires careful consideration, including cultural sensitivity, flexibility,

partnerships with local stakeholders, contextualized solutions, and a focus on sustainability through building local capacity and ownership.

In this context, the government has the responsibility to provide necessary resources like funding, infrastructure, and technical assistance, and offer subsidies to make essential inputs more affordable for small-scale producers, enhancing productivity and sustainability. By investing in infrastructure such as roads and communication networks, government can facilitate market connectivity, reducing post-harvest losses and improving producers' incomes. Additionally, government's regulations can ensure that private enterprises operate fairly, addressing issues like price manipulation and unfair labor conditions. Inclusive policy-making, which involves marginalized groups in the decision-making process, helps ensure the benefits of development programs reach all segments of the population. Moreover, regular monitoring and evaluation of development programs ensure they meet their objectives and benefit intended populations, with data informing policy adjustments for ongoing effectiveness. Investing in education and training builds the capacity of individuals and communities to participate in and benefit from development initiatives. This includes technical skills as well as knowledge about rights, market opportunities, and sustainable practices. In summary, by providing material support, ensuring market connectivity, regulating private enterprises, and focusing on equitable benefit distribution, governments create an enabling environment for sustainable development that benefits all, especially the marginalized.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

*Rural Youth Empowerment Programs:*

1. Expand agricultural training programs to include a wider range of crops and farming techniques.
2. Provide vocational training in trades such as tailoring, weaving, soap making, and construction, along with necessary tools and resources.
3. Develop microloan programs to support small business initiatives and agricultural projects.
4. Implement health awareness programs, particularly in family planning, to address health issues and ensure productivity and well-being.

5. Create programs that benefit communities by helping produce goods and services that can be consumed regularly, ensuring steady incomes for producers.

6. Emphasize the importance of regular monitoring and continuous material and financial support to sustain these initiatives.

7. Advocate for increased government investment in youth empowerment programs. These programs will allow young people to participate in the economy so that they have disposable incomes, access to commodities, and simultaneous access to education, healthcare, and support for peacebuilding.

8. Include community members in decision-making processes to ensure culturally sensitive program implementation.

9. Focus on developing infrastructure and making more appropriate educational investments in rural areas to support long-term growth and development.

10. The government and development partners should formally recognize and compensate the voluntary efforts of individuals in conservation and other development programs by providing financial incentives and creating paid employment opportunities, ensuring that their investments of time, work, and money translate into sustainable incomes rather than merely subsidizing corporate operations.

*Urban Youth Empowerment Programs:*

1. Increase access to educational scholarships and vocational training in high-demand fields such as computer literacy, small business management, and technical trades (e.g., electricity, plumbing, auto mechanics).

2. Implement financial literacy programs and provide microloans to support entrepreneurship.

3. Establish partnerships with local businesses to create internship and job placement opportunities for trained youth.

4. Emphasize the importance of more income generation activities along with psychological and emotional support to ensure holistic development and sustainability.

**Conclusion**

The study has revealed a significant gap between the theoretical frameworks of youth empowerment outlined in the literature and the practical realities observed in the field. Despite well-intentioned policies and initiatives, the implementation of youth empowerment programs faces numerous challenges, particularly in terms of resource allocation, monitoring, and cultural acceptance. This discrepancy underscores the need for a more practical and grounded approach to policy implementation that takes into account the specific needs and contexts of urban and rural youth in Liberia.

Effective youth empowerment requires not only robust policies but also practical support systems that include continuous encouragement, health awareness, and community involvement. Health awareness and personal hygiene are critical components often overlooked in theoretical frameworks but essential for the successful engagement of youth in empowerment activities. Furthermore, gender-specific barriers such as early marriage, sexual exploitation, and societal biases need to be addressed through targeted interventions and policy enforcement.

The study highlighted several key insights into the effectiveness of youth empowerment programs in Liberia. First, it emphasized the importance of tailoring these programs to the specific needs of urban and rural settings. For example, rural areas prioritize agricultural training, vocational skills, and health awareness programs, such as the TAT program that taught effective agricultural practices and significantly increased yields and income for participants. Additionally, rural youth benefit from vocational training in trades like tailoring, weaving, and construction, enabling them to start small businesses and contribute to the local economy. In contrast, urban areas focus on educational support, financial literacy, and technical vocational education and training (TVET) in fields like computer literacy and auto mechanics. An example from the findings is the YMCA vocational training program, where urban participants learned small business management and established successful enterprises, such as a money transfer business.

Furthermore, the study revealed a significant disparity in government support between rural and urban areas. Rural programs often suffer from inadequate funding, logistical support, and effective implementation due to a centralized system that primarily benefits urban settings. For instance, Victoria Massaquoi's microfinance program in Salayea faced challenges due to the lack of capacity building training and support, resulting in inadequate tracking of loan repayments and insufficient follow-up with

beneficiaries. Additionally, the study underscored the importance of community engagement for the success of empowerment programs. Massah Y. Mulbah's forest management advocacy in Salayea is a prime example, where involving local community leaders and members ensured relevance and sustainability. Her team's voluntary efforts in promoting sustainable farming practices led to a noticeable reduction in forest farming activities.

The study also highlighted the financial and logistical constraints faced by many local organizations, which hinder their ability to sustain operations. Organizations like Massah's often lack the financial and logistical support necessary for sustained operations and may not have the capacity training required to secure funding from international entities such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Relying only on charity and aid is insufficient; more government investment to ensure sustained effort and uninterrupted flow of finance, material, training, and personnel is essential. Enhancing the capacity of local organizations in grant writing, project management, and financial literacy is crucial for their sustainability. Lastly, the study pointed out the critical role of health and well-being in youth empowerment. Incorporating health education, particularly in family planning and personal hygiene, into youth empowerment initiatives can significantly enhance overall program effectiveness, as emphasized by Moses Muwein's health awareness efforts in rural areas.

The role of collaborations was also highlighted as a critical factor in the success of youth empowerment programs. Cross-sectoral collaborations among stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, local businesses, and international organizations, can enhance the effectiveness of these programs. For instance, integrating efforts from the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Liberia National Students Union, and YMCA can create a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to youth development. Collaborative efforts help in pooling resources, sharing expertise, and avoiding duplication of efforts, which is essential for maximizing the impact of youth empowerment initiatives.

For future research, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the long-term impacts of youth empowerment programs on participants' socioeconomic status, employment, and community engagement. Comparative studies between different regions within Liberia and other countries with similar socio-economic contexts can help identify best practices and innovative approaches. Additionally, gender-specific interventions are crucial to address the unique challenges faced by young

women, such as early marriage and lack of self-esteem, which were significant issues highlighted by participants. Assessing the impact of existing policies on the effectiveness of youth empowerment programs and exploring the role of technology in enhancing the reach and impact of these programs are also recommended. Future studies could examine the effectiveness of digital platforms and online training in providing skills and resources to young people in both urban and rural settings.

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