Youth to Youth:

Measuring Youth Engagement

Liberia, 2012

SUMMARY

Report Authors
Tom Brownlee
Liat Krawczyk
Kate Krumrei
Cari McCachren
Neha Raval
Celeste Visser

Academic Advisor
Dr. Susan Shepler
Assistant Professor
School of International Service,
American University,
Washington, DC

Logistics Coordinator and SFCG Research Intern
Amadou Bakayoko

Technical Advisor
Saji Prelis
Director of Program, Children and Youth
Search for Common Ground, Washington, DC

Liberian Researchers and Contributing Authors

Philomena Aggrey	Mattie A. Peters	Yameh Korleh
James A.B. Brown III	Mawine G. Reeves	Angeline S.P. Lindah
Sarra K. Dahn	Diana F. Ross	Jerrus D. Morris
Emmanuel N.B. Flomo	Sandra D. Salma	Miatta T. Sikarr
Blama K. Goll	Janet M. Gono	Susan A. Sumo
Kindness N. Nehwon	Moniayoung J. Gwion	Daniel B. Wehyee
Boakai A. Nyehn Jr.	Kamara A. Jallah	Edwin S. Wilson
Justin W.Z. Paye	James K. Kollie	T. Vogel Wrobeh

Summary Report: Youth to Youth –

Measuring Youth Engagement in Liberia

Youth are increasingly at the forefront of the global development and security agendas. They are often stigmatized as part of the problem, while their potential as a large untapped resource goes without recognition. In Liberia, people under age 35 constitute over 70 percent of the population. Within this cohort, youth ages 15-35 have not only been drastically affected by the civil war but, a decade after its end, are disproportionately disempowered by factors such as high unemployment, low access to quality education and training, and limited family planning. Liberian youth continue to be excluded from both formal and informal decision-making processes. Such marginalization limits their possibilities to positively contribute to a healthy Liberian society. Yet youth want to be involved. They are actively strategizing to solve their problems as well as those of their communities. To fully capitalize on this opportunity, Liberia must enable its youth – its contemporary and future leaders – by formally engaging them as partners in progress.

This is a summary report of a much broader study assessing various elements of youth engagement in Liberia and examining the extent to which the priorities of international donors are aligned with those of youth. A report based on this study details the perspectives, priorities, and experiences of Liberian youth based on first-hand accounts, analysis and statistics. The report also makes recommendations for addressing the concerns expressed by young people from all fifteen counties within Liberia. The study is the result of a collaborative effort between Search for Common Ground (SFCG), American University (AU), the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Liberia, and the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS). The report can be accessed at http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/children/programmes_children.html

Methodology

This work is youth led and has adopted a participatory youth-to-youth approach involving conversations with over 1000 young people throughout all 15 counties in Liberia and interviews with more than 20 representatives from donor agencies. The researchers used a "Listening and Learning" approach, which involved open conversations with Liberian youth about the issues that were important to them. This method was combined with more traditional research focused on various dynamics influencing Liberia, the role of youth in the country and international donor spending. This is the first time that the concerns of youth in Liberia have been captured in such a comprehensive way.

Findings

From these conversations, the following eight themes emerged as key concerns for youth with education, health, and livelihood as the themes discussed the most.

Education

Youth reported a large unmet demand for education in Liberia. Physical obstacles, such as the lack of schools, dilapidated buildings, and distance were cited most frequently, but youth were also concerned about social barriers to education (insufficient funds, family discouragement, teenage pregnancy, and corruption in the education system).

Needs highlighted by youth:
- More teachers with at least a "B" level Certificate
- Better access to quality teacher training facilities

- Improved incentives for teachers (salaries, benefits, accommodations)
- Teaching of critical thinking and problem solving skills in the classroom
- Increased access to secondary education as well as vocational training with special consideration for marginalized youth such as young people with disabilities
- Properly equipped schools with necessary supplies such as desks, chalk boards, books, etc.

Health

Insufficient healthcare infrastructure (e.g., hospitals, roads, ambulances) was identified as a constraint that compromises the health of a community. Trust in health care providers is low. Liberian youth perceive health workers as both corrupt and lacking in professional interpersonal skills. Limited access to clean water and sanitation were also frequently cited as major barriers to healthy communities.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Provide increased access to modern clinics with a greater supply of medicine at public health care facilities
- Improve patient services at clinics with properly trained and certified staff
- More outpatient support for marginalized populations such as the elderly, persons with disabilities and pregnant women;
- Greater access to improved water and sanitation facilities

Livelihood

Many youth are self-employed and depend on income from activities such as petty trade and agriculture. Youth often expressed feeling overwhelmed by the conflicting, yet unavoidable, demands of work, school, and other activities in their lives. They also conveyed frustration with the labor practices of foreign companies. Youth stressed the need to better align education and skills training with market needs.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Increased access for young women to gain access to meaningful employment opportunities
- Increased youth employment opportunities
- Increased access to relevant vocational training
- Improved focus on job-ready skills in education

Politics and Governance

Some youth expressed trust and enthusiasm for government, while others sharply criticized established power structures, corruption, and government's focus on Monrovia. Many youth felt excluded from political decision-making processes.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Increase youth participation in governance bodies at the community and national levels
- Augment mechanisms to increase transparency and hold those in power accountable to society at large
- Additional opportunities for civil society to participate in the political process
- Support the development of youth organizations independent of government structures
- Decentralize government decision-making and distribution of funds
- Inclusion of marginalized groups (young women, people with disabilities, ex-combatants) in decision-making processes

Infrastructure

One of the most interconnected concerns expressed by youth was the condition of roads and bridges connecting remote communities and resources. With limited infrastructure to deliver basic services (including economic opportunities, energy, water, sanitation, technology, and communication), many youth discussed their inevitable reliance on costly and ineffective alternatives.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Improve and increase road network especially connecting health, education, and market facilities
- More water pumps in rural areas
- Increased access to electricity throughout the country
- Increased access to cell phone networks

Peace and Security

Youth value peace in Liberia. Youth felt that despite significant funding allocated to improving formal security and law enforcement, government institutions for peace and security are not yet independent and stable. Youth expressed frustration that conflict or crime is often attributed to their age cohort without sufficient attention to underlying, contributing factors.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Reduce police corruption (actual and perceived)
- Standardize procedures at border check points
- Decrease access to small arms and light weapons
- Improve conditions of, and security within, prisons
- Resolve land disputes

Community and Culture

Youth experienced tensions in reconciling religious and traditional practices and modern values. They expressed feeling conflicted by the desire to take advantage of the public services and opportunities for employment and education offered in Monrovia while still contributing to their home communities.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Improve unity and trust among Liberian youth and between youth and the elder generation
- Increase participation of Liberian youth in community decision-making

Family and Gender

Family power dynamics are reinforced by community norms and greatly influence youth engagement. Young women in particular are often the least engaged. While older women are increasingly holding positions of power, young women continue to be much more hesitant to engage in politics than their male counterparts. Female youth carry the additional burden of child rearing and suffer the brunt of sexual- and gender- based violence. Women are often forced to depend on men for economic support; however, men, finding it difficult to live up to these expectations, also feel pressured.

Needs highlighted by youth:
- Eliminate prohibitive gender role boundaries
- Involve more women in decision-making roles
- Reduce teenage pregnancy rates
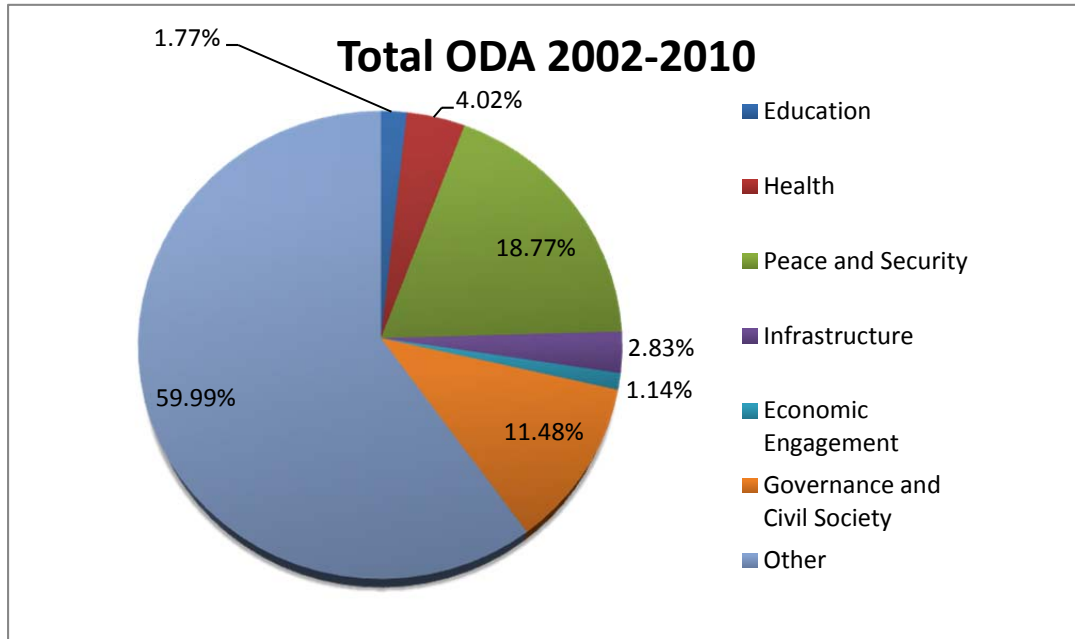- Decrease sexual and gender-based violence

Recognizing the **interconnected and complex nature of the issues** discussed, the researchers identified cross-cutting recommendations on how to improve youth engagement in addressing those concerns. The recommendations included below are meant to provide some thought-provoking concepts for key stakeholders looking to engaging young Liberians.

Youth Engaging Youth	• Encourage youth-to-youth mentoring • Implement youth-to-youth programing to educate young boys and girls on the impact that teenage pregnancy has on their futures • Build a youth-to-youth model for health education awareness training
Developing Youth Skills	• Train youth on the process of establishing community organizations • Train youth in peacebuilding and conflict resolution so they can lead community reconciliation and bonding efforts • Build capacity and increase access for young boys and girls to media opportunities including community radio
Using Youth Skills	• Encourage more young people to be teachers through multi-tiered approach: economic and social incentives • Utilize youth partnerships for building and maintaining water and sanitation facilities • Encourage youth to volunteer • Encourage youth entrepreneurship • Offer a work-for-grant program • Create equal opportunities for women and men • Integrate young people into security structures
Incorporating Youth in Decision-Making	• Create a checklist for including marginalized youth in decision-making • Decentralize youth organizations • Reduce youth organizations' financial dependency on government support • Form a reconciliation committee spear-headed by youth • Raise awareness about the importance of equalizing gender participation in decision making
Youth in Accountability	• Support youth-led assessment and evaluation teams to verify impact of donor funded programs that impact young people • Improve transparency in the health system by empowering youth monitors • Enable youth to monitor security forces • Use the Youth Engagement Matrix to gauge progress
Information Sharing	• Establish feedback mechanisms for students to communicate their needs and ideas to their teachers • Build a job skills database (with special attention to skills development and communication between employers and youth) • Promote stories of youth success in community development • Establish a youth community exchange program • Promote information campaigns to improve social perceptions of the teaching profession • Promote, on an on-going basis, youth as making positive contributions in their communities using radio, television, posters and billboards.

How does the Official Development Assistance distributed to Liberia relate to the concerns expressed by Youth?

Evidence indicates that the international donor community is addressing youth priorities, but more needs to be done to acknowledge and address youth concerns and priorities through inclusive decision-making bodies, processes, and programs across all sectors. More needs to be done to acknowledge and engage youth, to see their problems as they see them and not just as they coincide with the larger population. This study assessed whether, and to what extent, Official Development Assistance funding from the 12 largest donors to Liberia went to the sectors that were identified as critical for youth engagement.
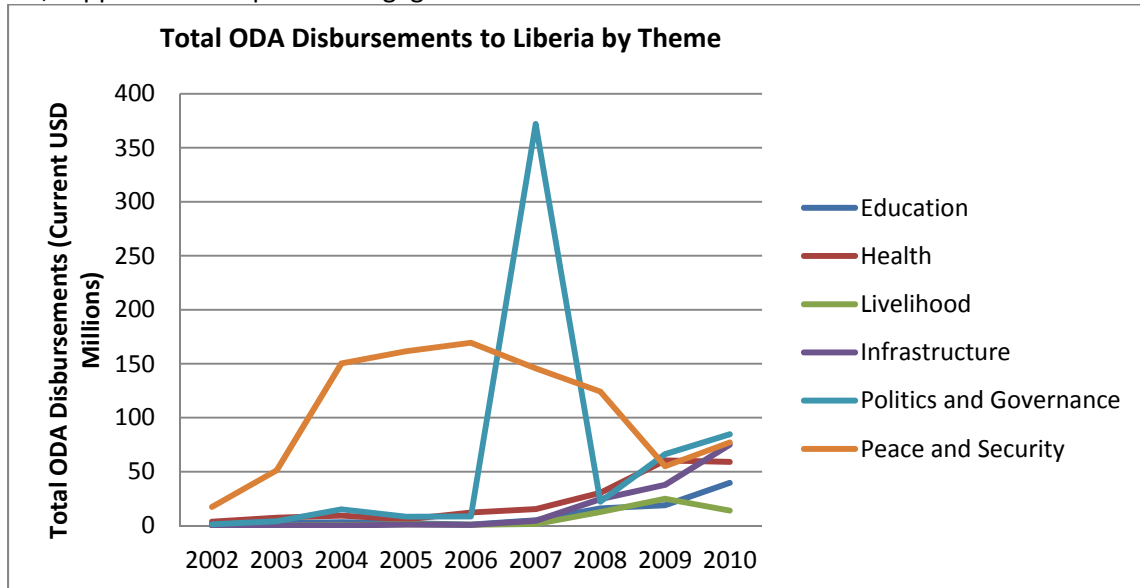

Source: OECD Data

According to the funding streams shown in the table above, youth priorities do overlap with donor priorities but are not a perfect match. While donor funds are directly allotted to programs in almost all priority themes discussed by youth (except Community and Family and Gender), funding data show that the priorities of the international community do not proportionally align with youth priorities. The available data show that in 2010 the highest priority themes discussed by youth (education, health, and livelihood) were funded less than infrastructure, peace and security, and politics and governance. Also, large sums of aid go to other priorities that were not directly addressed by youth.

This study suggested the use of a **Youth Engagement Matrix (YEM),** which is intended for use as a tool to monitor a selection of indicators pertaining to the eight thematic areas identified. In addition, the YEM can be used to track the amount of ODA that is disbursed to programs across each thematic area across time. The tool can be used to assess which areas are improving, faltering, or staying the same. An important function of the YEM is that Liberian youth can use it when advocating to government and donors to improve youth programing. For more detailed information please refer to the main report.

The authors of the report propose separating youth into a separate policy category in order to ensure needs are better met. Addressing youth as a cross-cutting issue is insufficient. When youth forfeit a 'special' place, they find themselves lost in the needs of the population as a whole. Selecting youth as a

pillar for special attention will help to both reintegrate youth into the larger population and single out youth-specific interests. A youth pillar will therefore better align aid and services to youth priorities, and as such, support full and positive engagement.

Total ODA Disbursements to Liberia by Theme

Source: OECD, 2012

Youth need to be recognized and their voices heard. Despite the challenges that youth face, especially in light of the recent conflict, they continually demonstrate the potential to engage on every level in order to foster positive change in their society. Liberian youth today are not looking back in time. Rather, young people in Liberia have shown themselves ready to create, maximize opportunity, and build a better future for themselves, their communities, and their country. It is necessary to work directly with young people in a meaningful way that respects their agency and encourages their potential. Paying attention to, addressing the needs and priorities of, and learning from young people is the best way forward for Liberia politically, socially, culturally and economically.

This is only a brief summary of a much more comprehensive effort. For additional information on this project including methodology, detailed concept formation of youth engagement, testimony on transformative elements of the 'youth to youth' process, and narrative in the voices of Liberian youth themselves, please visit http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/children/programmes_children.html for a free download of the report in its entirety.