

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT FORUM

(ADF-V)

LIBERIA



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COUNTRY BRIEF



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Liberia Country Brief

A. INTRODUCTION

Liberia is, perhaps, one of the most severely war-affected nations in Africa. Fourteen years of civil conflict have left a devastated, war-ravaged society, struggling to recover from destruction, suffering, pain and death. The war depopulated the rural areas, severely disrupted traditional social systems and structures and completely shattered state institutions. Over 250,000 persons were killed, approximately 500,000 displaced internally, and about 800,000 sought refuge in neighboring countries at the height of the war. There are a variety of factors that underlie the collapse of the Liberian state, but none are more significant than decades of corruption, combined with massive historical disparities between a privileged elite and an impoverished population. The Liberian GDP averages today 158m per annum, less than 50% of its pre-war levels, with national debts standing at an unsustainable US\$2.8 billion, representing a whopping 707% of GDP. Unemployment in the formal sector is 85%. Absolute and extreme poverty stands at 76.2% and 52% respectively. In terms of Human Development Index, Liberia is not even among the 177 countries listed in the 2005 Human Development Report.

The vast majority of Liberian affected by the war are the youths, a large number of whom now feel alienated, frustrated and vulnerable. They were witnesses to the gruesome murder of their mothers and fathers and/or other loved ones. In some cases youths were the principal perpetrators of these heinous crimes themselves. Changing their mind-set is therefore most urgent. The youth population aged between 15 and 24 years comprises a significant percentage of the population of Liberia, with those under the age of 15 averaging over 40%. With life expectancy rapidly declining to as low as 45 years of age due to factors including the spread of HIV/AIDS, those aged between 15 and 24 years are now a dominant group in society. Liberia's youths are most affected by change and also have the potential to be the most powerful agents of change. As such, they could either sustain peace or generate further instability in the country.

Yet past experience and current circumstances for the youth portends great risks to the country's future stability. The social, education and economic networks

and institutions of you are in disarray. The circumstances of youth present great threats to society;

- Expansion of organized crime amid proliferation of small arms and light weapons
- Trafficking in young children and young women;
- Unemployment
- Narcotics and alcohol abuse
- Prevalence of a culture of violence
- Inadequate educational resources
- Distrust of past and current leadership]
- The spread of HIV/AIDS

These threats are compounded by the fact that many youthful ex-combatants are yet to be effectively re-integrated into either jobs or training programs. Unless these issues are addressed in a systematic and coherent manner, an air of despondence and resignation may set in at best or at worst, you may resort to criminal activities or fall easy prey to war mongers. These are the general scenarios which underlie the situation of the Liberian youth.

B. THE NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY OF LIBERIA

In December 2005, the youths of Liberia in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and other partners, adopted a National Youth Policy with the theme: “Placing the Youth on the National Agenda of Liberia.

GOAL

The overall goal of the national Youth Policy is to promote youth participation in the national decision making process. It also aims to enable young people to provide input in community activities, national programs and democratically chose youth-centered activities and initiatives. The NYP emerges out of the needs expressed by young people themselves and their desire to stake their claim in national life. At the global level, the NYP is a means to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development goals by articulating the key role of youth in society.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the policy are:

- ❖ To sensitize all stakeholders on the issues affecting the youth in Liberia so as to mainstream them in policies and ;programs;
- ❖ To make a case for partnerships in implementing initiatives and programs which help youth to fulfill their expectations and needs;
- ❖ To identify, explore and suggest ways and means through which youth can be empowered to take initiative and promote the spirit of national service, volunteerism and self-help activities

- ❖ To propose ways to mentoring youth to be good citizens and to create conditions in which the youth will empower themselves and realize their full potential.

PRINCIPLES AND VALUES UNDERPINNING THE NYP

A key tenet of this policy is that any national development effort will require the support to youth-led programs and youth oriented initiatives. The NYP of Liberia should be seen as a basis for prioritizing public actions and programs undertaken by the government and other youth serving agencies, primarily to ensure that they make an impact in responding to the aspirations of young people. The NP is consistent with existing laws of Liberia and the broader development aspirations of the country. More particularly, it is an integral part of the post conflict recovery and reconstruction phase, articulating the needs, defining the roles and spelling out the responsibilities of young people of Liberia; specifically, the key principles that underpin the Liberia NYP are the following:

- Respect for the cultural norms, beliefs, mores and ethical values system. The National Youth Policy should respect the cultural, religious, customs and ethical orientation of the youth and should conform to universally accepted human rights practice without discrimination based on gender, race, age, ethnicity, political, religious affiliation and social orientation.
- Peace and reconciliation as cornerstones for positive, non-violent change in Liberia
- Equal opportunity. The policy will promote the principles of equal opportunities and equitable distribution of programs, services and resources. It will also endeavor to promote equal access to socio-economic opportunities for the youth, with gender equality as a guiding principle.
- Civic Responsibility
- Active participation at all levels

SUMMARY OF MAJOR ISSUES AFFECTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN LIBERIA

The National Youth Policy highlights the following as major issues affecting young people in Liberia;

1. Lost Opportunities in Education and Training

Fourteen years of intermittent civil war in Liberia have resulted in the destruction of schools and teacher's training facilities, the loss of teaching materials and a dramatic reduction in the number of qualified teaching staff. The prolonged conflict has undermined the national educational system by disrupting normal academic cycles and leaving an entire generation of young people without access to organized learning. As a result of this, among other reasons, Liberia's literacy rate today, stands at less than 40%

2. The Employment and Employment Opportunities

The economic growth rate of Liberia over the past two (2) decades has not been sufficient to absorb young people coming into the labor market, resulting in high unemployment rates particularly among the youth. Besides being a direct cause of the poverty now affecting much of Liberia's population, the lack of viable alternatives for sustaining their livelihood encouraged young people to take part in the civil war as a means of survival.

As a result of the war, many youths still remain without skills and education despite current assistance programs. In addition, many were traumatized by the conflict and remain unable to enter the job market as competitive actors. Their lack of work experience means that they can fall victims to exploitation by employers, enduring low wages and poor working conditions.

3. Gender-Based discrimination

Traditional and formal parts of the Liberian society are largely male-dominated, with a resulting tendency to discriminate against women and girls in the areas of employment, data information as relates to male and female youth. As a result, they remain vulnerable to harmful practices such as restricted access to education, arranged marriages and female genital mutilation (FGM). They can also fall victim to domestic violence and sexual exploitation. These factors play a decisive role in preventing female youths from fully participating in the social and economic lives of their communities.

4. Poor Public Health Care Facilities

One of the major consequences of the civil war in Liberia is the destruction of the health care delivery system which, to date, remains underdeveloped and cannot cater to the needs of the majority of the population. Before the war, there were 296 primary health care facilities operating in Liberia. Of these, 132 are now operational out of which 30% are supported by NGOs and religious groups.

Owing to the destruction of the infrastructure, many trained health staff are very reluctant to work in rural areas worst hit by the conflict. Prior to the civil war, there were 18 hospitals. Today, only 12 are fully operational and these are clustered around urban centers causing a severe disparity in affordability and accessibility of medical care between rural and urban dwellers. The country's population of close to three million is currently being served by only a handful of medical professionals. The high rate of infant and maternal mortality, the high incidence of severe stunting among children and the high rate of illiteracy bear testimony to the consequences of prolonged violent conflicts.

Some of the major health-related problems confronting youth today are the poor standards of sexual and reproductive health, the continuing prevalence of preventable “killer” diseases such as polio, measles and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The high incidence of the spread of the deadly disease HIV/AIDS, drug and substance abuse are common concern of youth and must be addressed adequately. The future of the youth is threatened by HIV/AIDS pandemic. According to the Ministry of health statistics, between 1986 and 2002, the AIDS cases increased among young people, aged 15 to 4.2% to 12.9%. Reproductive health is another form of health problem, which impacts generally on the youth population. Some related consequences or side effects include; teenage pregnancy, abortion, prostitution and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

5. Inadequate Sporting and Recreation

The sport sector in Liberia continues to suffer from inadequate funding and poor facilities. Hence, the country is missing out on the opportunity to use sport as a means of reconciliation and peace building. Clubs and organizations are unable to support either those wanting to take up sport as a recreational pastime or those who would like to engage in it professionally. As a result, the frequency of organized sporting events has remained low and the country currently struggles to develop the potential of its talented young athletes. All sporting areas must be developed and inclusive such as swimming, basketball, table tennis, track and field, horse shoe, badminton, lawn tennis, kickball soccer, golf, volleyball etc.

6. Environmental Degradation

The degradation of the natural environment through harmful practices such as improper waste management, uncontrolled mining and deforestation places a question mark over the sustainability of Liberia’s current process of development. In the absence of greater efforts at preserving the environment, future generations will be increasingly faced by threats such as soil erosion, pollution, of freshwater resources, and disappearance of indigenous fauna and flora.

7. Cultural and Identity Crisis

Liberia cultural heritage has been severely undermined by the country’s recent violent conflict. Due to the widespread upheaval, many traditional forms of creative expression were suppressed while cultural values and norms weakened. Today, as they try to assimilate foreign conventions and attitudes as part of their country’s modernization process, many Liberian youths are at risk of suffering an identity crisis. The question of an official indigenous language, national identity card for every citizen to be issued by local government institution, should be reviewed for concrete action leading towards the establishment of a national indigenous language and revitalized national identification scheme.

8. Poor Information, Communication and Technology

Liberia has fallen far behind even among other developing countries in terms of access to telecommunication and information technology. In particular, the scarcity of internet services leaves most Liberian youths unable to benefit from this highly effective communication and research tool. Although this gap is now being addressed with the rapid introduction of mobile telephone and the proliferation of newspapers and radio stations throughout the country, this has not necessarily translated into the provision of accurate and up-to-date information relevant to young people. Information campaigns on topics such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, unemployment, education, poverty reduction and other problems affecting the youth have generally not received adequate attention and coverage in the media.

9. Disillusionment & Disempowerment

Young people frequently feel that they are confronted by a paradox – trying to become integrated into the existing social order, yet at the same time acting as agents of change for a better tomorrow. As they aspire to become fully involved in the life of their society, they must be encouraged to participate in the process of governance and decision making. Failing that, young people may become frustrated to the point of engaging in violence against the established order; some of the youths who fought in Liberia's civil war did so out of a desire to upset the rigid hierarchical structures of traditional rural society.

Yet while the youth today constitutes over 50% of Liberia's population, they hold very little influence over the country's political and economic life. This exclusion can be attributed to established social attitudes and customs, as well as significant economic barriers. There is currently also a lack of effective structures for empowering the youth, with most youth organizations suffering from a shortage of financial and technical resources.

10. Displacement, Insecurity and Crime

Young people make up a significant proportion of those involved in criminality in Liberia today. While the civil conflict cannot be blamed for all of the ills of Liberian society, it has contributed to this state of affairs in three important ways. Firstly, the war gave rise to a segment of the population for whom violence and looting became a way of life. Secondly, it deprived young people of the positive influence of role models such as parents or community leaders leading to the erosion of moral and family values. Thirdly, the war led to the collapse of the criminal and justice systems resulting in impunity for those engaging in delinquent behavior such as theft, rape and drug abuse. In addition to this, the situation of cross border conflict and security especially in the southeaster,

northern and western Liberian region (Liberia & Ivory Coast; Liberia & Guinea-Conakry; and Liberia & Sierra Leone needs to be reviewed periodically.

C. LIBERIA'S PARTICIPATION IN THE ADF-V

The African Development Forum is a multi-stakeholder platform for debating, discussing and initiating concrete strategies for Africa's development. The Forum, initiated in 1999, has already been held four times with very good concrete outcomes including the initiation of a Program to support national ICT policy formulation and implementation in Africa. The fifth forum is now being organized under the theme "Youth and Leadership in the 21st Century"

In an attempt to gather broad based inputs and feedback from a cross section of Liberian youths in the ADF-V process, over fifty (50) young people representing several youth groups from all regions of Liberia met on October 17, 2006. The focus of this one-day consultative workshop was to provide the mechanism for articulating the concerns of Liberian youths and develop consensus regarding the solutions in preparation for this year ADF-V to be held in November, in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

During the consultation, the three sub-thematic discussions were held:

- ✓ Youth and Economic Development
- ✓ Youth and social Development
- ✓ Youth and Political development

After brief presentations on the sub-themes by four (4) youth experts, the youth representatives broke up into three (3) groups expressing their concerns and views of the various themes. The following encapsulates the views of the youths of Liberia as per the sub-themes:

Group – 1: YOUTH AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Creating Jobs for the youths

- Government should endeavor as a matter of policy and budgetary appropriations make 'Vacation Jobs" available for young people in both the private and public sectors including NGO's, INGOs and the UN Agencies. (Vacation Jobs are short term employment opportunities provided to students during the school vacation period.
- The 'Cadet System' (a system in which students were provided on-the-job-apprenticeship opportunities after school hours) geared towards given young people the needed experience for the job market should be reintroduced in government institutions as well as in the private and public sectors.

- Employers both in the private and public section should consider youth employment paramount in their recruiting programs.
- Government should design policies in consultation with communities' leaders and youth group to ensure a conducive environment for the promotion of sustainable empowerment.
- Entrepreneurship should be promoted and government should also promote creation of micro-credit activities with effective mechanism for monitoring.
- Liberian youths in the Diaspora are faced with acute unemployment, lack of employable skills, and other opportunities to develop their potentials. Government should find more pragmatic solutions to this problem.

Education and Training

- There should be compulsory and free primary education for all.
- There should be a feeding program for children in all primary schools throughout the country.
- Government should move towards the provision of free quality secondary education.
- Educational and vocational institutions should be decentralized to give equal access and opportunities to every young citizen of Liberia.
- The constitution of Liberia should be taught, beginning at elementary level. Patriotism and National should be a subject of study in every institution of learning.
- A Leadership development Training Program Should be instituted for youths wherein Leadership courses should be mandatory in all tertiary educational institutions and leadership qualities and skills should be taught at junior and senior high levels.
- Tax reduction and Tax holidays on all ICT equipment and compulsory computer skill training at secondary level must be a standing government policy.
- Rehabilitation and construction of schools in all fifteen counties especially the rural counties should be prioritized by government.

Health and HIV/AIDS

- Health and HIV/AIDS programs should be decentralized and health- care delivery system improved; Health education should be taught in all primary and secondary schools.
- Laws must be legislated and implemented against discrimination and stigmatization of people living HIV/AIDS.
- Laws must be enacted to stop the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Group 2- YOUTH AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Intergenerational Relations

- Adults should accept the fact that young people are major actors in the development process and therefore should be a part of decisions that affect them and the country. Youths, on the other hand, should make aware their positive potential through positive actions.
- The government should prioritize increased enrollment of girls in schools. The involvement of women in the governance processes should also increase.
- Government must encourage & facilitate youth to engage their colleagues in rural areas in the area of education (formal & voc/tech) i.e. promoting volunteerism amongst youths
- Youth promotional activities should be decentralized.

Religious setting

- Religious tolerance should be emphasized and practicalized as a core societal value, as stated in the organic laws (the constitution).

Volunteerism

- Youths should consider themselves as agents of positive change in their respective communities, and should practicalized this through community services and other acts of volunteerism.
- Volunteers should receive some form of compensation.

Participation

- The social transformation of youth should be the concern of both the government and the private sector.

- Recreational facilities should be provided by government in its decentralization initiatives.
- Home Arts & Sports programs in both primary & secondary schools should be embedded in the curriculum.

GROUP 3 – YOUTH AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Definition: YOUTH – a young person, between the ages of 15 – 35 years, with an intellectual capacity; neither a child nor an adult; who is willing to take responsibility to contribute positively towards national growth and development.

National Identity

- Liberia should adopt a national language – KPELLE is strongly recommended and should be taught in schools (primary & secondary) curriculum.
- A national dress code should be institutionalized in Liberia; Balsam (Liberian country cloth) is most appropriate.

Peace and Conflict Resolution

- Liberian youths are capable of intervening in conflict situations and the peace building process. More opportunities should be made available to them.
- Emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of Liberian youths (particularly females) on their full participation in the decision making processes at all level.

CONCLUSION

Youth issues in Liberia, particular in this new post-war dispensation, cannot be 'sugar coated', swept under the rug, given 'lip service' or treated cosmetically. The issues concerning Liberian youths are cross-cutting, deep and have the capacity to propel the process of development and growth in the country or throw the country back into chaos and instability. As a result, all must be done in a concerted manner to effectively and adequately work along with the youths of Liberia in addressing the issues confronting them.

The formulation and adoption of the Liberian National Youth policy was a major step forward in this endeavor. It is the resolve of the Government of Liberia, through Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Federation of Liberian Youths (FLY) and other partners and stakeholders that this policy does not gather dust on the

shelves but be further enacted into a **National Youth Law** by the National Legislature to set the basis for enforced implementation.

The African Development Forum – V is again a critical step in the process. Through these discussions at the highest levels, we will be able to share the vision and gather best practices through out the continent in meeting the challenges of youths head on.

Our gratitude to all who made this noteworthy and commendable endeavor possible.

Partnering with youths... for youths,

Jamesetta Howard Wolokolie
MINISTER OF YOUTH & SPORTS
REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA