

Liberia Rapid Social Assessment

In post-conflict Liberia, 'community' is a deeply contested notion reflecting historical inequalities, a crisis in intergenerational relations and the breakdown of rural institutions. A Rapid Social Assessment, conducted in 2004, cautioned that promoting Community-Driven Development on the basis of generalized assumptions about community participation and cohesion risked exacerbating these cleavages. A Social Assessment Update carried out in 2006 confirms that these risks remain valid despite changes in community dynamics and institutional responses. This note summarizes the main findings of the Rapid Social Assessment Update.

Liberia Rapid Social Assessment

In 2004, the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme commissioned a Rapid Social Assessment (RSA) to provide guidance to a range of agencies addressing community reconstruction activities in post-war Liberia. The RSA provided analysis of the socio-cultural, institutional, historical, conflict and political context of Liberian society and analysis of the constraints and opportunities posed by the context for conducting Community Driven Development (CDD) operations.



Bushrod Island Bridge—Scene of heavy fighting in 2003
Credit: Joanna de Berry

The RSA assessment concluded that “community” in Liberia is a deeply contested notion, the years of conflict having destroyed much of the social capital (trust and capacity for collaborative action) that existed at a community level. Assumptions of social cohesion, community participation and consensus underpinning community-driven development were suggested as overly idealistic. The RSA recommended that CDD operations take measures to prevent resources being the cause of conflict within communities and to ensure that vested interests not dominate planning and implementation processes. The report also recommended that community development activities not be too narrowly focused on infrastructure reconstruction to the exclusion of other aspects that support reinforcing social cohesion. The principal recommendations of the RSA included:

- CDD activities should contribute to the rebuilding of positive social relations through community-led definition of participatory structures and processes for the prioritization,

- planning and implementation of local development activities;
- CDD initiatives should facilitate community-led analysis of local conflicts and appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms;
- CDD initiatives should promote responsive and accountable interaction between citizens and local governance structures.

Liberia Rapid Social Assessment Update 2006

In June 2006, the World Bank commissioned an update of the Liberia Rapid Social Assessment. The aim is to identify how far the recommendations of the original RSA remain valid by assessing the changing and current social and institutional dynamics that influence CDD. The Update includes a review of the extent to which key stakeholders have reacted to the recommendations of the RSA and aims to provide recommendations for the ongoing improvement of CDD programs in Liberia.

The Update confirms that the concerns of the RSA still remain relevant, particularly in light of persistent tensions over return and reintegration. Evidence suggests that responsiveness of development agencies to these dynamics is still lagging, yet there are important opportunities to build on emerging community cohesion and to engage with a new forum for local government involvement.

This note summarizes select findings of the Update. It substantiates the key recommendations of the RSA Update, which stress a continued need to:

- Improve representation and participation in local and community development processes;
- Build stronger peace building, conflict analysis, mediation and conflict

resolution components into CDD projects;

- Promote principles of citizenship and representation in local government processes.

Current Social Dynamics and Community Relations in Liberia

Social dynamics and community relations in Liberia have been made more volatile by the return and reintegration process. The cessation of open hostilities, and the uneasy peace imposed by UNMIL forces, have created the conditions for hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians, and tens of thousands of ex-combatants, to return to the villages and towns they left during the war. However the resettlement process remains problematic. Two major tensions persist in the return process and these undermine community cohesion: ethnic and religious tensions; and the lack of integration of former ex-combatants.

Ethnic and religious tension is particularly acute between ethnic Mandingo and those who took an anti-Mandingo position during the early-mid 1990's, when Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) promoted anti-Mandingo violence in Lofa, Nimba and Bong Counties.



Bong County

Credit: Joanna de Berry

The legacy in these Counties is a climate of suspicion and hostility evident in the return process. The most common conflicts are over land and property ownership, ‘cultural’ and ‘religious’ disrespect and ongoing debates over whether the Mandingo are truly Liberian. These tensions are becoming manifest in the resettlement of previously mixed populations along ethnic lines in Lofa, Nimba and Bong Counties, and the forcible eviction of groups through land and property grabbing, and threats of violence.



Monrovia

Credit: Daniel Owen

In some towns in these Counties commercial and residential properties in the town centre are owned (with title-deed) by Mandingo citizens, but have been illegally occupied during recent years whilst the owners have been in refuge in Guinea. The displaced owners stated that they are afraid to return, fearing harassment. Because of this, ethnic segregation also persists.

The land and property disputes associated with these tensions are not easily solved. While many of the disputes are localized, and can be settled through local mediation, others are of a more serious nature and involve appropriation of housing or retail premises and large cash-crop plantations, often established by the owners over generations. Resolution of these disputes requires an understanding of Land Law that, typically, contesting parties do not have. It also

requires a degree of political will and transparency of process that, some suggest, is yet to materialize.

Ex-combatants and the larger group of young people up-rooted by the war are the most vulnerable to future militia recruitment. Peace in Liberia will hinge on their successful reintegration into the wider society, yet there remain significant social barriers to reintegration.

Many ex-combatants feel “rejected by society”. Many ex-combatants say they can not return to their homes in rural areas for fear of retribution for deeds committed during the war. Furthermore, many observed that their participation in public works programmes meant they were easily identified as ex-combatants and that this further ostracized them from the wider social group, meaning that their only social interaction tended to be with other ex-combatants, for example in the “ex-com ghettos” of Monrovia. The specific targeting of ex-combatants for mass employment and skills-training programmes therefore may have implications for social cohesion and community development in Liberia. Some ex-combatant respondents complained that the ex-combatant label prolongs their alienation from wider society and jeopardizes their reintegration prospects.

Resentment to ex-combatants is exacerbated by the perception among other population groups that all the NGO help goes to ex-combatants, and not to their victims. For other ex-combatants, their participation in mass employment programmes has resulted in them adopting the ex-combatant role as a livelihood strategy. Interviews with Town Development Committee members, ex-combatants and NGOs attempting to transition from targeted mass employment projects to community development initiatives, reveal that it is now commonplace for ex-combatants to refuse to participate in

community initiatives, demanding instead that they are paid for their efforts.

If the premise that social cohesion is important for the transition from war to peace, the alienation of ex-combatants and young people from the wider society is an issue that must be addressed. The absence of sense of ‘belonging’ is, therefore, an important issue. Ex-combatant respondents, when asked how they might be accepted back in to rural society, spoke of the need for a process to “broker” their reintegration at Clan and village levels.

Reforming Positive Community Relations

While the return processes are characterized by tensions, there are nevertheless encouraging examples of new attitudes to local decision-making and reintegration that could offer replicable models for the strengthening of positive social capital in CDD operations.

There is some evidence of emerging community cohesion between generations and across ethnic groups. Some communities have remobilized forms of cooperation such as Town Development Committees to organize reconstruction of housing, rehabilitation of farmlands and communal ‘town cleaning’ days.



A New Marketplace

Credit: Joanna de Berry

In some rural communities, younger people are assuming a prominent role in development-related decision-making. Alongside the Town Chiefs and traditional elders, the (predominantly male) youth representatives offer their views on local development priorities, and participate in planning activities. While these discussions mainly relate to practical issues such as town cleaning, rehabilitation of housing stock and agricultural lands and ‘brushing’ of roads and paths, they also include debates about local development priorities.

The extent to which these new attitudes are emergent is unclear and needs further research, and it should be recognized that elsewhere traditional authority figures continue to dominate development-related decision-making processes, and youth, women and minority ethnic groups are excluded; consequently, their development aspirations and their willingness to participate in activities are constrained, and their disenchantment with the restraints on their progress intensified. However, the social transformation dynamic taking root in the post-war period is an important asset on which CDD can build.

Innovative Approaches to Reintegration

There are also important developments in the reintegration of ex-combatants at the community level. Local conciliation processes are important in the successful reintegration of ex-combatants and returning populations. Religious and traditional authority leaders have undertaken processes that “cleanse” individuals and “purify” Clan lands by “honoring” those civilians who died in the bush during the war (but received no proper burial) and “cleansing” the District of the atrocities committed during the war.

A USAID project supported a series of such ceremonies during 2005. The ceremonies

were entirely planned and organized by Loma and Mandingo elders (male and female) and youth representatives from the immediate locality, and from the dispersed populations in Monrovia and Guinea. The ceremonies were announced in IDP camps throughout Liberia, ex-combatant ‘ghettoes’, and in towns and refugee camps in Guinea and were conducted at sodality shrines and Mandingo Mosques . The events had a major impact. Estimates are that up to 10,000 ex-combatants traveled to participate in the ceremonies; many have remained in the District, and rates of civilian return to the District increased dramatically in the months after the events as word spread. The ceremonies were not only essential for the successful reintegration of ex-combatants, but also for the re-establishment of harmonious relations between the Loma and Mandingo communities.

Institutional Responses to the Challenges of Community Development

Responses to the

Recommendations of the RSA

Community development activities offer the most direct opportunities to foster emergent attitudinal change and innovative approaches to cohesion. Yet development agencies in Liberia have yet to offer a consistent response to the recommendations of the original RSA on these issues. Partly this is due to operational and organizational constraints, in particular the operating environment of an emergency response, the rapid staff turn-over typical in such contexts and the want of an organized forum to bring together interested parties. The RSA was conducted and launched at a time when the DDDR process was in its early stages; in large areas of the country it had not yet commenced, combatants were still under arms, the security situation was unstable, access to many areas of the country was limited and levels of civilian displacement still high. As might have been predicted, many of the participants in the RSA launch moved-on within the subsequent 12-month period and, for want of an ongoing process of engagement on the key

issues presented by the report, the RSA fell off many institutional agendas.

Had a process of engagement on relief to development transition issues been established, it would have helped create a donor environment more conducive to the earlier incorporation of social cohesion-oriented thinking in programme funding strategies.

The Liberia RSA was researched in mid-2004. Since then community development in Liberia has been strongly donor driven. And the main emphasis of the donor community has been on provision of basic infrastructure, essential services and promoting security and stability – primarily through large-scale public works programmes providing employment and / or skills training for ex-combatants. While the language of participation permeates much of the development agency activity during the last 2 years in Liberia (and considerable efforts have been made in this direction in difficult circumstances), INGO and NGO representatives interviewed in June 2006 for the RSA Update were fairly candid in their assessment of progress made.

Institutional Opportunities

Ultimately, the provision of basic services, and the development of a sense of national identity, must emerge from interactions between citizens and the State. Such



LACE, the World Bank implementing partner on community development
Credit: Joanna de Berry

interactions require representative structures and processes.

For the foreseeable future, international and local development agencies are likely to play a significant role in the provision of basic infrastructure and the delivery of essential services. This role will diminish over time as central government develops the capacity of its local government administrations to play a greater role in service provision. Although a decentralization policy is yet to emerge in Liberia, the Government of Liberia has indicated that it sees community participation as being fundamental to this process. CDD initiatives can contribute to achieving this goal by establishing structures and processes that connect citizens with local authorities and providers of development services and by promoting coherence in the planning and implementation of development activities.

The newly developed District Development Committees (DDCs) provide one possible framework within which these aims can be achieved for interaction between citizens, service providers and local government authorities. The DDCs have recently been endorsed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and have been established in each District of 10 of Liberia's 15 Counties (expansion to the other 5 is ongoing). DDCs are composed of fourteen members including the district commissioner and sectoral office holders and elected representatives of chiefs, elders, women, youth and CBOs.

The quality of this interaction will depend partly on the capacities of those appointed to representative roles, partly on the representative basis of the DDC membership, and partly on the ability of citizens to create and utilize representative structures and participatory processes through which they will interact with the DDCs, local authorities and service providers. The RSA Update reveals concerns that, without a programme of capacity-building for citizen's groups below the level of the DDC (e.g. Clan and

Town Development Committees, and local CBOs), the DDC structure will operate at a remove from local structures, and will fail to generate the community-level legitimacy necessary for its proposed role as interlocutor between citizens and service providers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To respond to community tensions and to build upon emergent positive social relations the Update recommended a new impetus for local and community development in Liberia. CDD operations are an appropriate way to foster cohesion at the local level but the RSA Update suggests that they still need to provide more attention to the following key areas at the local level:

- i) **Improving representation and participation in local and community development processes.** Given persistent ethnic and religious tensions in Liberian communities, it is imperative to ensure that all ethnicities, religions, generations and genders are represented in local development decision making. This will prevent local development favoring one set of people to the detriment of others. In particular, CDD operations should ensure the inclusion of ex-combatants and other returnees. A growing body of evidence indicates that continued targeting of assistance to ex-combatants heightens resentment towards them and prolongs their alienation from wider society in Liberia.
- ii) **Working within emerging local governance structures.** To establish principles of citizenship, representation and participation in local government processes, local and community development projects should increasingly engage and build the capacity of local government officials and structures to plan, implement, monitor or supervise.

Development agencies should seek to build upon and strengthen the DDC structures where they exist.

- iii) **Strengthening peace building, including community-led conflict analysis, mediation and conflict resolution.** Community development project design and funding criteria should also include conflict analysis and resolution components that engage communities in identification of local conciliation processes appropriate to each ethnic and / or religious section of the population. Development agencies should work with the various organizing community committees to explore the possibility of developing their capacity to act as a conflict mitigation resource on an ongoing basis within their own District, and as advisors to subsequent projects in newly identified areas.

These initiatives should also be backed by stronger measures at the central level:

- i) **Improving capacity for conflict resolution over land disputes.** Capacities to deal with land and property conflicts within the judiciary and the Ministries of Internal Affairs and Lands, Mines and Energy are stretched, and the fact that many land title records have been lost or destroyed during the war compounds the problem. Whilst direct support is beyond the scope of CDD activities, donors may wish to discuss with the relevant authorities the potential for a programme of technical support to the formulation of a Land Administration Reform Programme, including District and County-level surveying and mapping initiatives. There are also
- ii) Opportunities to provide support to local organizations with specialist skills that will help mitigate land and property disputes.

- iii) **Strengthening coordination of local and community development.** The newly established Working Group on Local and Community Development is the mechanism through which the Government of Liberia liaises with donors, UN agencies and NGOs on community development matters. Managed under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Works, the key functions of the group include policy formulation, information sharing and monitoring and evaluation. Membership includes representation from six Line Ministries, five international donors and UN agencies and a representative each from the INGO and local NGO communities. This forum could be strengthened by greater inclusion of CDD field-based practitioners to exchange of information about, and experiences of implementing, community development approaches, with a specific emphasis on capturing field-level experience.



Schoolchildren, Lofa County

Credit: Dan Owen

This note was prepared by Daniel Owen and Jo de Berry. It is based on the report: *Liberia Rapid Social Assessment Update—Phase I*, by Steve Archibald (IDL Group, June 2006). This note may be found online at www.worldbank.org/cdd and additional copies can be requested via e-mail: socialdev@worldbank.org

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