

SUMMARY BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM THE USAID/LIBERIA CROSS-SECTORAL YOUTH ASSESSMENT SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS



USAID

PURPOSE

Conducted by YouthPower Learning at the request of the USAID Mission in Liberia, the purpose of the cross-sectoral youth assessment was to utilize a positive youth development lens to capture the experiences of Liberian youth across a number of sectors, including education and skills development, employment and entrepreneurship, agriculture, health, security, and social and civic participation. This overview presents assessment findings that emerged from research conducted in September-October 2018. The assessment consisted of a desk review and field visit to six counties prioritized by USAID (Montserrado, Lofa, Grand Bassa, Bong, Nimba, and Margibi). During the field visit, the assessment team held 30 peer group discussions with 275 male and female youth ages 18-35; 12 focus group discussions with 96 local community stakeholders; and 38 interviews with 79 key informants from government, USAID, other donors, and non-governmental organizations.

FINDINGS

Different youth cohorts are best distinguished by the relative assets that they possess, including skills, physical and financial assets, information, access to services, and personal networks.

The most vulnerable youth segments in Liberia are those who possess the fewest assets, most often characterized by the following features:

- Younger youth under age 25 generally have fewer skills, work experience, financial resources, physical assets, and networks; they also appear to have less access to services than older youth.
- Youth from poverty-affected families, typically defined as those living in the lowest two wealth quintiles (an estimated 70% of the population).
- Out-of-school youth, as well as those at-risk of dropping out of school, who have not yet completed high school (approximately 60% have not completed primary education).
- Youth living in rural areas, representing roughly half of all youth and yet who are disproportionately under-served by government and donor-funded programs.
- Youth working in the informal sector/vulnerable employment, and especially in the agro-food system which are both characterized by low-value, physically demanding, and risky work.
- Females: especially younger girls at risk of unintended pregnancy, those who are pregnant, and unmarried young women with dependents (one-third of young women give birth before the age of eighteen).
- Youth living with disabilities who face unique financial and physical barriers to accessing education and other services, and who experience social exclusion caused by systemic discrimination.



- The most highly vulnerable segment is the at-risk street youth in urban areas, locally referred to as Zogos (males) and Zogese (females). These are youth who usually experience homelessness, lack parental or family support, and are typically engaged in substance abuse, prostitution, and/or related criminal activity. They are also largely marginalized from the rest of society.

In Liberia, the youth experience is largely driven by poverty and lack of education, further compounded by teenage pregnancy and substance abuse.

Overwhelmingly, education is the number one aspiration among youth, and is strongly linked to—and very often equated with—earning a livelihood. In fact, the majority of youth struggle with completing their education while concurrently earning a livelihood, through their mid-twenties and beyond. The association between education and livelihoods cannot be underestimated: youth most often define their education priorities as vocational education, or learning a trade, and they stress that education is most relevant when tied to job intermediation and entrepreneurship support.

Teenage pregnancy—often a result of transactional sex due to poverty—is a compounding factor that negatively affects young mothers who are forced to leave school to raise their children on their own, perpetuating the cycle of lack of education and poverty. Unintended pregnancy is fueled by widespread misinformation and low uptake of family planning and reproductive health practices among youth.

When it comes to livelihoods, youth are often involved in multiple income-earning activities to support themselves and their families. While jobs that earn “quick money” are the means for immediate survival, youth aspire to more skilled occupations, and those that

offer meaning or contribute to society. Agriculture plays many important roles for both rural and urban youth: as a means of survival, as a stepping stone to other livelihood opportunities, and as a desired livelihood in and of itself.

Unfortunately, youth face daily life disruptions due to security issues (crime, corruption, safety). Girls who are economically vulnerable are especially at risk of violence, rape, and sexual coercion in the home, at school, in the street, and in the workplace. Security concerns are more prevalent among urban versus rural youth.

Linked with the issue of crime and violence is the pervasive substance abuse problem—a surprisingly salient concern among youth. While further research on the topic is needed, adults and youth alike assert that youth on drugs are the main perpetrators of violence. Drug-related problems are more present in urban areas, with youth in Monrovia naming it as a serious concern.

The assessment’s positive youth development lens highlights the importance of youth-friendly safe spaces, inter-generational relations, and inclusion.

Overall, youth participation and contribution, a key component of the positive youth development (PYD) approach, does not seem to be a high priority. While some youth encourage community volunteerism and appear satisfied with the level of youth involvement in community processes and decision-making; others are more skeptical and want to see a tangible result of their efforts. In terms of political engagement, many youth see it as a transaction, such as a source of income, as a way to earn food or clothing, or as a way to obtain a job or avoid political fall-out. Importantly, youth note that they have few outlets for positive engagement, especially outside Monrovia, and express a need for youth-friendly



safe spaces where they can express themselves, learn from others, take on leadership roles, and engage meaningfully in society.

Like in most countries, there are inherent tensions between Liberian youth and adults. Youth have mixed attitudes toward government, ranging from expectations to disappointment to frustration. Frustration with public servants, especially teachers, nurses, and police, is a common theme. Parents play an important role in youth's lives and are in need of support—in many cases the parents are youth themselves.

Inclusion is a particular concern for females and for youth with disabilities. Restrictive gender norms seem to be most prominent in the livelihoods domain, where there is clear discrimination toward women, compounded with the barriers created by early marriage, unintended pregnancy, and childcare responsibilities. Youth (and even community leaders) with disabilities endure hardships to education and livelihoods that are

not adequately addressed by the local institutions and communities where they live.

PROMISING STRUCTURES AND PROGRAMS PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN LIBERIA

The most salient bright spot in youth education and livelihoods is the many private and public service providers implementing exceptional models of youth skills development and workforce readiness, accelerated learning programs for out-of-school youth, job intermediation, and entrepreneurship development. The limitation to these programs is their narrow coverage relative to demand, particularly among more vulnerable youth cohorts. Furthermore, due to the limited financial and human capacity constraints within the Government of Liberia, these programs are heavily reliant on donor funding.

BOX 1: EXAMPLES OF MAJOR PROGRAMS SUPPORTING YOUTH LIVELIHOODS¹

Youth Opportunity Project (YOP) – World Bank, Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS), Liberia Agency for Community Empowerment (LACE): provides training and employment support to 5,000 vulnerable youth in Monrovia, and provides agricultural and life skills training and supports to 10,000 rural youth across all 15 counties.

Prospects III – Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, MYS, Mercy Corps: providing 20,000 young people with employment and entrepreneurship services in Montserrado, Bong, and Nimba counties.

Youth Rising/ European Union (EU) Support to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for Young People in Liberia – EU, MYS, UN Industrial Development Organization: supporting six public TVET institutions at the secondary level.

Youth Entrepreneurship and Employment Project (YEOP) – African Development Bank, MYS: strengthening select institutions to deliver skills development, job readiness training, and entrepreneurship development.

Evaluations of other previous projects demonstrate the positive impact of youth skills training when combined with livelihoods supports and access to capital, including: (a) the World Bank-funded Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women (EPAG) program; (b) the Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI) in Liberia; (c) the Action on Armed Violence program for ex-combatants; and (d) the USAID Advancing Youth Program (AYP).

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Increase youth earnings in the informal sector. There is a great unmet demand for programs that offer skills, assets, and supports for youth to generate income through self-employment in the informal sector. Targeting rural areas, and particularly the agriculture sector, is important for reaching a wide swathe of under-served youth. Boosting youth earnings in Liberia's informal sector

involves both demand- and supply-side interventions, such as the expansion of alternative learning and workforce readiness programs, expansion of youth's access to finance, engagement of lead firms, support to business service providers, and other enabling environment supports that allow youth to integrate into and upgrade within markets.

¹While these activities focus on livelihoods given its importance stated by young people, many have adopted positive youth development practices. These and additional programs that exist across sectors are mentioned in the full report.

2. **Strengthen Liberian micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises for youth employment.** Another potential opportunity is to develop “demand-side” interventions that promote the growth of micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises, especially in the agriculture sector, in ways that create jobs for youth.
3. **Increase youth’s access to finance.** While service providers should continue current efforts in savings mobilization and financial literacy, there is a need to introduce flexible loan products and/or value chain financing for youth startups that “graduate” youth from grants.
4. **Expand youth-friendly voluntary family planning.** Youth have enormous potential to spark a massive cultural shift in family planning attitudes and behaviors across Liberia. Innovative behavior change communications interventions that enlist youth as creators and that “meet youth where they are” have shown promise in increasing family planning awareness and utilization.
5. **Address the emerging substance abuse epidemic.** Given the overwhelming numbers of youth describing substance abuse problems in their communities, there is a critical need to invest in research on this topic.
6. **Apply positive youth development approaches within youth programs.** Youth success in Liberia is clearly tied to cross-sectoral factors. Youth demand programs in Liberia that are more youth-driven. It is also important to engage other adult stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, nurses, police, and community-based organizations, who all play important roles in the lives of youth.
7. **Be intentional while targeting youth segments.** New programs should pay greater attention to vulnerable youth segments, particularly in rural areas. USAID could start by setting a minimum target for reaching youth cohorts with certain characteristics of vulnerability (as defined in the full report), or by dedicating discrete activities to serve certain at-risk youth segments.
8. **Establish an institutional body for coordination.** Although national policy is cited as being youth-inclusive, greater coordination around youth services is needed.



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This brief summarizes the USAID/Liberia Cross-Sectoral Youth Assessment Situational Analysis, which can be found in full at: <https://www.youthpower.org/liberia-youth-assessment>

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USAID YouthPower Learning generates and disseminates knowledge about the implementation and impact of positive youth development (PYD) and cross-sectoral approaches in international development. The project leads research, evaluations, and events designed to build the evidence base related to PYD. Concurrently, YouthPower Learning employs expertise in learning and knowledge sharing to promote engagement and inform the global community about how to successfully help transition young people into productive, healthy adults. YouthPower Learning supports the implementation of the 2012 USAID Youth in Development Policy to improve capacity and enable the aspirations of youth so that they can contribute to, and benefit from, more stable, democratic, and prosperous communities.

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