

Dreams Deferred: Educational and Skills-building Needs and Opportunities for Youth in Liberia

Women's Refugee Commission

September 2009

These are the complete recommendations from the Women's Refugee Commission report *Dreams Deferred: Educational and Skills-building Needs and Opportunities for Youth in Liberia*. The report is based on a field mission to the Republic of Liberia to look at young people's education and skills-building needs and opportunities.

The report can be found at: www.womensrefugeecommission.org/liberia-recommendations

Recommendations

Based on information gathered during this assessment, the following are recommendations of actions to take to strengthen and expand educational and job training opportunities for young women and men. This is by no means an exhaustive list of opportunities; through major participatory planning processes in the last two years, The Government of Liberia and partners have identified dozens of items for action in the areas of youth employment and empowerment, including those contained in the Poverty Reduction Strategy 2008-2011, the UN Joint Programme on Youth Employment and Empowerment and the National Youth Policy Action Plan.

For further suggestions as to how development actors can support and complement those frameworks, see the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-commissioned *Liberia Youth Fragility Assessment (YFA)*¹ of April 2009, which makes for essential reading for stakeholders on youth issues in Liberia. Donors would do well to identify the YFA recommendations that USAID does not plan to implement at present and that might warrant funding.

All actors in the vocational training sphere have a responsibility to:

- Ensure access to a continuum of services from formal and/or non-formal education, including life skills to psychosocial interventions (where appropriate) to skills training based on identified labor market needs to provision of startup capital, credit, savings products and/or toolkits and, crucially, to concerted monitoring, including micro/small business consulting;
- Facilitate structural and policy changes at the national level that will enable 1) the provision of quality, standardized training services and 2) the development of micro, small and medium enterprises, especially in the agricultural sector in rural areas; and
- Concentrate on building local capacity—the Government of Liberia, civil society and private sector—to provide training services over the long term. Importantly, the

government should work to facilitate the development of private sector training firms and local NGOs.

More specifically, respondents spoke of the need for the various stakeholders to take the following actions:

Government of Liberia

- Create a working group specifically focused on youth employment issues that would coordinate the “bewildering array of inadequately coordinated assistance”² coming from donors, Government of Liberia ministries and national and international service providers. The group could be chaired by Ministry of Education and Ministry of Youth and Sports on an alternating basis, or by some other arrangement that would minimize the perceived “turf issues” between the two. This role could perhaps be played by the existing National Working Group on Technical Vocational Education and Training that includes various Government of Liberia ministries and vocational training providers and which is soon to become a permanent entity.
 - Engage a sub-working group to analyze the Poverty Reduction Strategy and County Development Agenda outputs with an eye toward maximizing the youth employment potential of each. For example, where a County Development Agenda calls for the construction of a number of schools, stakeholders could ensure the inclusion of NGO skills training graduates in completing the work. This will require close cooperation with authorities in the area of procurement and may require changes at the policy level.
- Engage young people to design and implement a multiyear, multimedia campaign to change the negative image of agriculture as a career and create a patriotic youth movement around achieving food security.
- Engage in an ongoing process toward deriving the maximum levels of local economic development from the various concession agreements. A dedicated team, independent from the Ministry of Finance Bureau of Concessions, could be tasked with:
 - Facilitating the creation of local stakeholder groups around the concessions
 - Ensuring that the firms are supported to meet their human resources needs
 - Supporting participatory local economic development processes to maximize the local production of goods and services consumed in the concession areas
 - Conducting value chain analyses³ around the concessions and their productsAny work in this area must recognize the opportunity cost for firms of engaging in such a process and that historically the relationship between government and the private sector has been antagonistic.
- Educate staff at all levels on the importance of the private sector as the engine of Liberia’s future growth.

Donors

- Prioritize programs and projects that will increase the agricultural productivity of the rural youth majority. Support agricultural supply firms in connecting with rural clients. Phase out programs that provide seeds, tools and other agricultural inputs, programs

which are preventing the development of agricultural supply firms and spin off businesses that could be the sources of crucial wage jobs.

- Work with the Ministry of Agriculture to support the development of small feed and fodder enterprises to supply animal husbandry projects. Engage municipalities (Zorzor, Voinjama) to build simple slaughter facilities and train processors in modern butchery techniques.
- Build the capacity of the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Education in the areas of proposal writing, project management and monitoring and evaluation. These ministries have requested such training specifically and weaknesses in these areas are seen by many as the main bottleneck to improving the whole vocational training enterprise in Liberia. Build the capacity of the Ministry of Education's TVET department in the various vocational skill areas, as well as in TVET administration.
- Support the government to scale up its labor-intensive cash-for-work schemes, for example in waste management, tree planting and other environmental works, road construction and other infrastructure projects.
- Support the government to design and implement a subsidized wage scheme for youth work experience in social services provision, especially in the health sector.
- Train more skills trainers. Many trainers are "aging out" of the business and many of those who remain complain that their knowledge is out of date. Such an effort would likely require the temporary importation of experts from neighboring countries.
- Support the government to refurbish TVET centers and construct more centers in underserved areas, as called for in several of the County Development Agendas.⁴
- Build the capacity of local service providers to provide training in accordance with new national standards (forthcoming, late 2009). Several local service providers complained that they are bypassed by donors in favor of international NGOs, which has long-term repercussions for sustainability of this sub-sector of Liberian businesses.

Vocational Training Providers (NGOs, International NGOs, Private Firms)

- Conduct participatory local-level youth-led market surveys in locales where training interventions are planned. Presently, most training providers base their selection of skill areas for training on students' preferences and anecdotal evidence. Those surveys which are conducted are not participatory in nature. One available tool is the [Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth](#)⁵ developed by Columbia University and the Women's Refugee Commission.
- At the outset of any program, carefully explain what is expected of the trainees and what they can expect from the program. Require that trainees understand and sign a "contract" that delineates their responsibilities as a beneficiary of the training and other services rendered. Such an agreement should also explain the responsibilities of the service provider.
- When trainees are deciding on their preferred skill area, invite experienced workers in those fields to meet with trainees and explain what to expect. Skills training providers have found that trainees often change their minds after hearing from veterans in their chosen fields.

- Engage microfinance institutions, where feasible, to connect graduating trainees with microcredit products. Engage retail banks to facilitate the process of beneficiaries opening savings accounts. In the absence of retail banks in most areas of the country since the end of the civil war, few service providers have been able to provide this service. But with the growth of the retail banking sector, several said that they would now do so.
- Stagger the availability of particular skills courses from year to year in order to keep from over-saturating the local market for a particular skill. Maintain a record of what skills were taught and where the trainees are residing after graduation.
- Encourage female youth to train in traditionally male trades.
- Train individuals in multiple skill areas, recognizing that most Liberians employ multiple livelihood strategies from day to day and may have to rely on more than one skill to maintain a steady income.
- Elevate agricultural training to a core skill within the curriculum and emphasize agricultural skill specialization.
- Even when training in a trade for wage employment, provide training in entrepreneurship skills as well. Service providers stated that the employers they work with found it useful for workers to be familiar with the basic concepts of running a business.
- Stagger the delivery of incentives (grant monies, tools and other inputs) in multiple tranches over time in order to create multiple opportunities for positive reinforcement to graduates reaching their goals.
- Facilitate the creation of workers' collectives to pool resources and share the burden of labor, especially in agriculture. This approach requires careful attention from field staff; several service providers complained of personality clashes within collectives and the tendency for unscrupulous individuals to "take over", causing some groups to disband.
- Budget sufficient resources to monitor graduates and provide business consulting over an extended period after completion of skills training. Respondents said that six months should be seen as the minimum acceptable monitoring period, but most said they would prefer to monitor over a period of a year or more. This will require a change in the nature of donor funding, which many service providers complain is most often allocated on time scales that are too short to fully empower the beneficiaries.
- Measure program success using multiple indicators, not limited to whether or not the trainees are finding employment in the fields in which they were trained. Possible

Access to Banking and Finance

Access to credit and savings products is seen by training service providers as one key to post-graduation success.

Microfinance has been largely unavailable to the vast majority of potential clients since the end of the war and has been provided mostly by NGOs with little expertise in this complex area of work. The business skills training offered by some microfinance providers is seen as inadequate, sometimes lasting only one or two days.

Fortunately, the microfinance industry is now steadily growing with the entry of at least three experienced foreign firms offering group lending products and is expected to grow rapidly over the coming years as more firms enter the country to fill the vacuum.

The retail banking industry is also growing, with the incorporation of several new firms competing for clients in the woefully underserved market. Most banks have branches only in Monrovia. However, in Lofa County, Voinjama now has a branch of Ecobank and Zorzor will have its own Ecobank branch in the near future.

indicators could include the number of meals consumed in a day, health outcomes, savings and income levels.

- Ensure that training curricula are geared toward a population that missed more than a decade of school as a result of the war and in many cases may be illiterate. Several service providers complained that they lost precious time in having to simplify their training curricula.
- In consultation with young people, parents and relevant authorities, determine the ideal content (life skills, peace education, health, etc.), structure (hours, location, safety concerns, etc.) and inputs (childcare, sanitary supplies for girls, feeding, etc.) to provide non-formal education opportunities that attract the maximum number of out-of-school youth.⁶
- Support the government and private providers to expand access to residential training programs. While this approach will not be appropriate for everyone, several service providers have found success in giving trainees a rigorous, structured environment in which to learn their preferred trade(s) and benefit from a holistic package of services. This approach requires the cooperation of the trainees' families and/or home communities to provide care for the children of trainees while they are in training.

In the area of agriculture training, one successful approach has been in ensuring that beneficiaries have secure access to land by arrangement with community leaders.⁷ More than one international NGO respondent said that they would like to be able to purchase land and grant it to groups of agriculture trainees, who would then agree to conform to certain conditions of use. However, these approaches are probably not feasible in many geographic locations and may be prohibitively expensive to implement at scale.

¹ Walker, Gary et al./USAID. *Liberia Youth Fragility Assessment*, April 2009. This document discusses a sampling of the largest planned investments including estimates of the number of jobs they will create.

<http://www.theniapeleproject.org/files/Liberia%20Youth%20Fragility%20Assessment%20-%20USAID.pdf> .

² Walker, Gary et al./USAID. *Liberia Youth Fragility Assessment*, April 2009. This document discusses a sampling of the largest planned investments including estimates of the number of jobs they will create.

³ Value chain analysis is a market analysis tool used to assess how products gain value as they pass through the range of activities needed to bring a product to market.

⁴ International Rescue Committee is currently working with the Ministry of Education to refurbish and to support the work of several TVET centers, but many areas of the country are still lacking such facilities.

⁵ Women's Refugee Commission and Columbia University. *Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth*, 2008. http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_ysl_toolkit.pdf.

⁶ Chaffin, Josh/UNICEF ESARO. *Working with Adolescents in Situations of Civil Unrest, Population Displacement and Post-crisis Transition* (Working Draft), 2009.

⁷ For example, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has contracted with the international NGO Landmine Action to implement a "boot-camp"-style residential agriculture training intervention for the last holdout militia members that occupied the Guthrie rubber plantation until 2007. Landmine Action points to the post-graduation land grant as one key to the program's success.