

**TRIP REPORT**  
**12-15 FEBRUARY, 2008**  
**LIBERIA**

**A. Background:**

Fourteen years of brutal conflict devastated Liberia's economy, its physical infrastructure, and its human assets. Liberia today is one of Africa's poorest nations. While accurate data are not available, it is estimated that close to one million people fled from cities, villages, and towns to neighboring countries of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and other countries to escape the conflict (Joint Needs Assessment Report, 2004). Over 350,000 people moved into Internally Displaced Camps across the country. The subsequent social and human capital costs have been enormous.

The long years of civil war, combined with political instability, took a heavy toll on the education sector in Liberia. The damage to the country's infrastructure, which affected all sectors, extended to education, with an estimated 80 per cent of schools destroyed during the conflict. By 2006, at least 32 per cent of the public primary schools were still not available for use. Among the usable public schools, only 26 per cent had safe drinking water and 35 per cent had latrines, though not in the gender-required ratios. There was a pervasive lack of school furniture and supplies, while learning and teaching materials were seldom available. Teachers themselves were in short supply as they too, had fled during the war and those that remained were irregularly paid due to lack of a valid payroll system tied to some form of qualification.

The democratically elected government of Liberia, under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, has been actively promoting the free and compulsory primary education policy since taking office in January 2006. As a result, the country has experienced a dramatic increase in enrolment, especially among girls. The government made education a priority in the recovery period and many refugees made their children's schooling a condition for their return to Liberia.

While this is very positive news for the country, signaling that life is beginning to return to "normal" for many households, the large increases in student enrolment have placed an enormous burden on a critically under-resourced public primary school system. The return to school of large numbers of children and youth who missed out on education during the conflict years adds to the demands on an already overstretched system. Class sizes swelled to record highs while classroom space remained limited. The barely qualified, poorly paid school teachers were handling huge classes of learners of different ages, abilities and academic backgrounds. In 2007, an estimated 85 per cent of grade one learners were aged 8 to 20 as opposed to the official primary-school age of 6 to 7 years.

Within this context, failure to deliver the promised quality education could lead many learners to begin to drop out of school, creating insecurities particularly in the cities where many had returned to and endangering the fragile peace prevailing thus far. It was clear that without much external assistance to the education sector to start rebuilding the system, the movement from emergency relief to long term planning for education development would be difficult and education recovery illusive. The need for long term strategic planning and education financing was seen as critical and efforts to obtain resources to do this began in earnest in early 2007 with the development of the Liberian Primary Education Recovery Programme (LPERP 2007 – 2010).



### UNICEF support

UNICEF Liberia has an upstream strategy with activities designed to support recovery and reform of the education system. UNICEF also operates with a more targeted approach that provides specific support for education and other services in seven of Liberia’s fifteen Counties.

The targeted counties (Lofa, Bong, Nimba, Grand Gedeh, Maryland, Bomi and Montserrado) have been the worst affected by the prolonged conflict in Liberia. They originally had large populations that fled to the neighboring countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire and some into IDP camps elsewhere in the country during the conflict. As hostilities ceased it became essential to prepare for return of the population and resumption of development efforts. Basic infrastructure that were damaged and services that were disrupted must be restored to meet the needs of the returning population. Five of the seven target counties have borders with Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d’Ivoire.

Education activities carried out in these areas include delivery and distribution of instructional supplies and school furniture, support for the implementation of the Accelerated Learning Program, which compresses six years of primary education into three and is intended for older than primary school aged children whose schooling was disrupted by the war; rehabilitation of education structures (schools and education offices); and strengthening the capacity of Education Officers.

UNICEF education support in Liberia aims to: (i) improve quality of the education response in a post-crisis transition situation; (ii) increase the resilience of the education service delivery in order to reduce the risk of slippage and promote “turnaround”; and (iii) promote evidence-based policies, efficient operational strategies and fit for purpose financing instruments for education in emergency and post crisis situations.

**Counties of UNICEF's Intervention**  
2007 Enrolment figures of Public Schools per county

	<b>County</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total</b>
1	<b>Bomi</b>	11,670	10,632	22,302
2	<b>Bong</b>	39,863	31,716	71,579√ 22,777
3	<b>Gedeh</b>	12,545	10,232	√
4	<b>Lofa</b>	57,183	56,881	114,064√
5	<b>Maryland</b>	15,377	15,699	31,076√
6	<b>Montserrado</b>	48,130	45,538	93,668
7	<b>Nimba</b>	66,949	61,712	128,661√
	<b>Total</b>	<b>251,717</b>	<b>232,410</b>	<b>484,127</b>

In 2007, the Accelerated Learning Programme was implemented in 11 Counties in Liberia. UNICEF also supports the Education Management Information System and provides teacher training. Technical assistance is provided to the Ministry of Education around the engagement in the policy dialogue and in establishing an innovative fit for purpose financing mechanism for the recovery of the education system as Liberia was admitted to the FTI Partnership in April. As a result, Liberia is providing a test case for establishing a fit for purpose flexible financing model which will not only allow the Ministry of Education to reform the education system but will easily evolve into a Direct /General Budget Support, minimising the transaction costs that project funding exerts on government ministries.

### **B. Purpose of the Mission:**

- (i) Introduce and explore support for two initiatives designed to support education, security and development in Liberia and three other Mano River Union countries (Guinea, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire): *(a) Learning along Borders for Living across Boundaries* and *(b) Talent Academies*
- (ii) Advise on concrete steps for taking these initiatives forward
  - in addition to the current country programme
  - in terms of advocacy, planning and logistics
  - in terms of financial resources, technical inputs and partnerships' support
- (iii) Review progress with UNICEF's support for the **Liberia Primary Education Recovery Programme** (LPERP), especially on the pooled fund for implementation. UNICEF is contributing US\$12million into this pooled fund by agreement with the Netherlands and other major donors who reviewed Liberia's plan for funding under the EFA Fast Track Initiative.

The visiting team held internal discussions with the UNICEF Representative and her staff, and also held extensive discussions during meetings with the President of Liberia, senior staff of the Ministry of Education, UNCT partners, researchers, and several non-UN partners active in education.

### **C. Conclusions:**

The two initiatives presented by Dr. Cream Wright were well received and the President of Liberia instructed the Minister of Education to discuss the initiatives with Cabinet members.

### **I. Brief overview of the two initiatives**

The *Learning along Borders for Living across Boundaries* initiative is an addition to the Primary Education Recovery Programme. It goes beyond simply providing education, to promoting recovery and development within a secure environment. This initiative seeks to use the provision of quality social services such as child friendly schools (or clinics) to promote four key objectives: (a) provide quality primary and junior high school education in these border communities that are still recovering from years of conflict; (b) encourage refugees and displaced

populations to return to these communities by providing high quality facilities that signal an improved quality of life; (c) transform quality of life in these communities with schools that incorporate water, toilets, solar power, cell phone connectivity, community libraries, life skills based curriculum, income-generating activities and other amenities and services geared to promoting local development; (d) consolidate the peace across national boundaries by supporting links between schools on either side of the border, especially at a time when the military forces (e.g. UNMIL) are being drawn down in all four countries.

The *Talent Academies* initiative addresses the problem of adolescents and youths who have lost out on schooling due to prolonged conflict. It is linked to the programme of multi-purpose youth training centers that are designed by the Government of Liberia to promote skills and job opportunities for young people. However this initiative, introduces three innovative principles. First, is the selection principle by which youths are selected based on their talents (not years of schooling or certificates). Second is the principle of aspiration by which youth are urged to aim for the best in the world in their field of talent, rather than to simply try to seek out a living through apprenticeships or small scale self employment. Third is the compensation principle, through which youths are compensated with remedial education to make up for their deficiencies and also provided with support to enhance their lives whilst trying to make the most of their talent. Areas in which these talent academies would concentrate include sports, fashion industry, food production and preparation, music, drama and other performing arts, etc.

## II. Government ownership

The Ministry of Education was briefed on the two initiatives to be led by the MOE in collaboration with the other relevant Ministries (housing, youth, sports, gender, finance, etc). It was made clear that the funds for these initiatives were separate from the allotted amount to the Pooled Fund (US\$12 million). The Minister of Education welcomed these initiatives and offered to explore possible locations for the Talent Academy institutes. He pointed out that the two initiatives being introduced by UNICEF touched on key issues that were critical not only for education but also for “development with security”.

There was consensus among members of the Ministry around these initiatives. The idea of baseline surveys for the *Learning along Borders for Living across Boundaries* initiative was important as well as an interest in ERNWACA working with Liberian university students. The Ministry agreed it would be critical to build up the borders on both sides and that the inclusion of health and all social services would enhance protection. The proposed Talent Academy institutions could be seen as complementary to existing government programmes, especially the Youth Centres, and a link is essential to maintain sustainability. UNICEF could first start with one model (fashion academy) and introduce a second on Performing Arts. Given his view of these issues, the Minister of Education decided to acquaint President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf with what he called “these very exciting and promising solutions”.

The UNICEF team met with the President in order to deliver a first hand account of these two initiatives and other matters (especially in view of the impending visit of the UNICEF Executive Director). The President also wanted to be briefed so she could decide on authorizing any action required on the part of her Government for the success of these programmes. She expressed appreciation and great satisfaction with UNICEF as a leading partner in support of Liberia’s recovery, reconstruction and development. She highlighted our work in water and sanitation, immunization, child protection and education among others, for which she thanked the UNICEF Representative.

The President stressed that children are not reading and the country needs more libraries. Parents who have joined literacy programmes would be encouraged to read to their children. UNICEF Liberia mentioned that packages have been designed for first grade students which include readers. Additionally community libraries would be included in the initiative for the border communities. In relation to the Mano River Union, and noting the President as its’ chair, UNICEF indicated that there have been funds earmarked for the Mano River Union to oversee the regional aspect of the *Learning along Borders for Living across Boundaries* initiative and assist in strengthening regional cooperation. UNICEF reiterated that the two initiatives would fast track the current work of the government in Liberia’s education recovery plan.

At the end of the meeting, the President instructed the Minister of Education to raise the two new initiatives at the Cabinet Meeting scheduled for the next day, so they could be discussed with other ministries likely to be involved.

### III. Visit to the border

A field visit took place at Ganta in Nimba County, located at the Liberia-Guinea border. The objective was to discuss the initiatives with the District and National County Education Officials, teachers, parents and youths, as well as to conduct site visits for a location of a child friendly school in line with the initiative. The site visit allowed a visual perspective of the standard of living in these border communities and level of local skills available. Nimba is one of the most populated counties of Liberia and together with Montserrado comprises around 80 per cent of the population. With 200,000 students in Nimba county, the schools are overcrowded sometimes with more than 60 students per classroom. Many of the schools were private. Schools were needed with essential services such as water, hygiene, sanitation, latrines, electricity and furniture (some students sit on bricks). Secondary schools are also in demand.

There is a thriving community in Ganta engaged in small, local commerce. There is much potential for the youth to contribute in a positive way to their environment. Conversation with a few youths proved informative. There were requests for the government to build universities so that the students do not have to leave Ganta to continue their education. There were interests in learning trade (making soap) and business. A few primary-aged school girls mentioned nurses, teachers, fashion and also indicated an interest in playing sports.

A site visit to local contractors trained by USAID in carpentry was conducted and material costs discussed to explore the possibility of contracting local contractors for the provision of school furniture. If the young carpenters would construct quality furniture that adheres to standards they could be contracted to provide chairs for the schools.

A meeting was held with a PTA at the location of an unfinished project for a school that would include primary, junior and senior levels and needed financial assistance to complete. UNICEF advised the PTA to include separate toilets for boys and girls in their plan. Furthermore, in order to build a good quality school with sufficient indoor and outdoor space, it would be advisable to build only one level of school at the present site and identify land space to build the other levels. UNICEF Liberia Country Office would look into this project further, which if built along CFS standards could be used as a model school in the area.

A site visit was conducted to look at the facilities and condition of a school about  $\frac{3}{4}$  kilometres from the border which was closed for the week. The school split into two buildings across the road from each other with poor toilet facilities. The schools had neither sufficient outdoor space nor were they properly built to withstand leaks and damages during the rainy season. For the *Learning along Borders for Living across Boundaries* initiative, a new school would have to be built closer to the border with child friendly standards and would require the government to allocate land. Additionally, the schools would be equipped with a community library as per the request of the President of Liberia

### IV. Pooled funding

UNICEF allocated US\$12 million to the proposed Liberia Primary Education Recovery Programme (LPERP) which has been transferred to an Education Pooled Fund administered by UNICEF. The Government of Liberia has accepted accountability for the funds. This core contribution to the Education Pooled Fund will be commingled with funds from OSI (US\$5 million) and other future donors. Through the creation of this pooled funding mechanism, UNICEF aims to leverage additional resources for children and education recovery in Liberia. It is an innovative way of pooling funds that fulfills all five core principles of the Paris Declaration (i) Ownership, (ii) Alignment, (iii) Harmonization, (iv) Managing for results and (v) Mutual accountability. It aims to ensure national ownership and to build capacity of systems and institutions during the complex post-conflict transition period and until Liberia can receive catalytic funds from the Education For All Fast-Track Initiative and can move towards a full SWAP and direct budget support. UNICEF plays an active role as the lead Education Development Partner in Liberia and is a key member of the Advisory Board.

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## D. Next steps:

⌚ **Conceptual clarity and implementation steps** - Provide conceptual clarity as well as define implementation steps for both initiatives with the government counterparts

⌚ **Advocacy** - Ensure an advocacy strategy to (i) maintain momentum (ii) secure strong government Leadership (iii) secure support of key external partners (iv) promote **community ownership**.

### ⌚ **Decisions in consultation with Liberia Country Office**

- (i) Two Child Friendly Schools to be established in each of the 7 Bordering counties (Grand Cape Mount, LOFA, Nimba, River Gee, Grand Gedeh, Gbarpolu and Bong counties).
- (ii) One Fashion Talent Academy for priority action, and a Performance Arts Talent Academy to be established, and their location to be determined by the Government
- (iii) Roles and responsibilities for government's lead and UNICEF's facilitation

### ⌚ **CFS programming & technical tasks**

- (i) Design of facilities, equipment, teacher training etc. for CFS in border areas
- (ii) Costing of full implementation per CFS in the border areas
- (iii) Link initiative to LPERP and PRS
- (iv) Financial implications for national budget and donor support budgets
- (v) Identify possible architects

### ⌚ **Talent Academies programming & technical tasks**

- (i) Design TA specifications for facilities, equipment, instructor training etc.
- (ii) Costing of full implementation per TA
- (iii) Development of criteria for selection by talent (youth focus group discussion)
- (iv) Links with current technical and vocational education programmes
- (v) Link initiative to LPERP and PRS
- (vi) Financial implications for national budget and donor support budgets

### ⌚ **Sub regional focus** through:

- (i) UNCT joint support across the 4 countries
- (ii) Involvement of MRU/ECOWAS Secretariat
- (iii) Possible coordination by Regional Office
- (iv) M & E across the 4 countries, as well as joint progress reviews for each initiative
- (v) Setting national and regional standards
- (vi) Facilitating exchange of technical expertise and other resources between countries
- (vii) Sharing of experiences and learning together (including through meetings of EPOs of the four countries)