Life in Transition:
Ongoing Social and Economic Impacts of Internal Displacement on Young People in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

Displacement in Liberia has been a reality since 1989, when the first of two civil wars broke out. The effects of the conflict on the education and development of young people are well documented, but the splintering of communities between the capital Monrovia and the outlying counties has received less scrutiny. This paper argues that community-based groups are best situated to help the post-war generation born into the consequences of displacement in the West Point slum of Monrovia. Education programs for the post-war, liminal generation should follow community-driven development (CDD) methods designed to meet the needs of these young people and account for the negative externalities of Liberia's large internally displaced youth population. This paper explores the theory and methods behind CDD within the context of international labor standards, which can act as a guide in program design and are particularly relevant for service delivery in Liberia, where child labor and informal employment are prevalent. Working within this context, using CDD methods, and presenting a case study of an NGO working in the West Point slum, the authors illustrate how policy interventions can be tailored to the highly dynamic and often unsafe world in which many post-war Liberian youth live.

I. INTRODUCTION

Displacement in Liberia has been a reality since 1989, when the first of two civil wars broke out (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2007). The effects of the conflict on the education and development of young people are well documented, but the splintering of communities between the capital Monrovia and the outlying counties has received less scrutiny (Ellery and Webley 2010). The shuffling of young people and especially orphans among geographically dispersed extended family members has created a situation of ongoing threats to child safety, slow academic and social development, and increased strain on caregivers (US Department of State 2010). Previous studies have explored the success of interventions on former combatants and child soldiers, but few focus on the generation born after these combatants (Blattman and Annan 2012).

This paper argues that community-based groups are best situated to help the post-war generation born into the consequences of displacement. Education programs for the post-war, liminal generation should follow community-driven development methods designed to meet the needs of these young people and account for the negative externalities of Liberia's large internally displaced youth population. These programs best serve at-risk children living in dynamic, post-traumatic situations when guided by normative standards and rules based in previous research. International law provides a framework for defining child labor and its consequences, which can act as a guide in program design and is particularly relevant for the highly prevalent child labor and informal employment in Liberia. This paper explores widely accepted international labor standards as a departure point for asserting that education can provide certainty, skills, and improved welfare for post-war displaced youth in Liberia.

II. SURVEYING DISPLACEMENT AND THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-WAR DISPLACED IN LIBERIA

Quantifying the long-term effects of displacement and conflict on family and childhood development in Liberia can be challenging. A survey of the number of children per family in Monrovia may yield different responses depending on the time of day, how much detail is provided in the question, and factors related to the interviewer. A typical exchange while collecting data goes something like this: "How many children do you have?" "Six." "Are these your children?" "Yes." "All six?" "Yes." "So, you have six children?" "No, these two are from my sister; she died during the war. This one is my auntie's; she is back in the bush [Liberia's rural interior] and this one was my other sister's, but she is in Ghana. These two are mine." Baseline surveys in West Point found that many young people are living with "aunties," a term that can mean anything from a person's mother's sister to a neighbor or willing caregiver. These "adopted children"

are often put to work, domestically and elsewhere, to earn their keep or to relieve the burden on another family member.

The displacement crisis is ongoing for the post-war generation. These young people were born toward the end of Liberia's civil conflict or shortly afterward but are growing up in a Liberia that is trying to rebuild the social, educational, infrastructural, and cultural fronts all at once—a shaky and uncertain process.

This instability is exemplified in the area of West Point—not just physically and psychologically but geographically as well. One of Monrovia's largest slums, West Point, was constructed on dredged sand from construction of a nearby port. It is estimated that 95 percent of its population relies on well water stored in shallow metal buckets (Browne 2012). A May 2011 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that as many as one-third of the more than 70,000 residents of West Point were displaced during the conflict before settling in the slum, a large proportion of whom are youth (Browne 2012).

Protracted displacement has left many young people, particularly girls, at risk of commercial or sexual exploitation, which creates additional barriers to education access (US Department of State 2012). Many parents and caregivers recognize the importance of attending school but have come to rely on the income brought in by their biological and adopted children. When caregivers are struggling financially, young people are often passed off to another "auntie" or family member.

Displacement is often a cause of socioeconomic shock. Families often have few resources to fall back on when they lose their homes, land, or livelihoods during displacement. Roles and responsibilities change. Young people may find themselves as primary caregivers for elderly family members or younger siblings. These changing dynamics present new economic challenges (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2007).

Increased economic vulnerability due to displacement or family separation is inextricably linked to child labor. The ILO Convention No. 182 identifies the worst forms of child labor as all forms of slavery, trafficking, or forced labor; prostitution and production of pornography; involvement in illicit activities, including drug production and trafficking; and hazardous work, defined as that which is harmful to a young person's health, safety, or morals (International Labor Organization 1999). Although accurate measurements are difficult to obtain, research suggests that Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest incidence of children engaged in hazardous work, with an incidence rate of 15.1 percent for children aged 5-17 in the region—more than double that of any other global region (Gunn, Reinhart, and Wanjek 2011). Despite legislation that prohibits children younger than 16 from working during school hours, the US Department of Labor (2012) recently found that at least 32.7 percent of children aged 5-14 in Liberia were

working. These facts illustrate the gap between institutional intention and enforcement, which highlights the opening for policy intervention.

The combination of continual displacement, shifting among caregivers, economic exploitation, and lack of support has created a situation where education is not an option for many young people. While the Liberian Government struggles to build capacity, community groups in West Point have formed to address the problem.

III. COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT: A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR HELPING POST-WAR CHILDREN

Given the challenges facing informal internally displaced communities, the barriers to implementing successful policy interventions in West Point are evident. The area presents a context where access to basic services is uneven at best and often non-existent. While there are groups working in West Point to provide education and vocational training, more research is needed on property rights and the allocation of public goods, including sanitation services.

New research on community-driven development (CDD) provides a theoretical and practical guide for projects in West Point. Emphasizing the placement of local community members at the helm of project design and implementation, CDD has gained significant traction in the past decade as evaluation methods testing its effectiveness have become more refined. In a recent World Bank working paper, Susan Wong (2012) estimates that the Bank has allocated between 5 and 10 percent of its portfolio to CDD projects in the last ten years. CDD goes beyond the simple notion of "local ownership" and can provide an effective mix of outside technical support, community social capital, and context-specific interventions to empower beneficiaries.[1] This emphasis on community needs means that CDD projects exist in a variety of forms. There is no single model for CDD projects, but the methodology employed in their evaluation has become increasingly codified as CDD garners more interest (World Bank 2011).

A growing literature on CDD explores issues of reverse causality, instances where CDD provides legitimacy for faulty projects, and the influence of community homogeneity or pre-existing cooperation on project success. Effective program design and stating specific outcomes are the cornerstone of evaluating CDD. While allowing a community to create and run a project to meet its needs may leverage community networks, it may do nothing for social cohesion or the inclusion of women or minorities. In rural Liberia, for example, researchers found that a community-driven project focusing on social and political cohesion and social welfare had few

[1] See for overview of CDD, Janmejay Singh 2012.

direct material returns. The project, however, significantly improved social inclusion for marginal groups and moderately improved access to education (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009).

According to Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao (2004) of the World Bank, a defining aspect of CDD is that it allows for distribution and delivery of goods in a decentralized context. The urban, chaotic, and largely ignored slum of West Point provides a case study in how community-driven projects can use local knowledge to provide services to young, displaced girls that do not fit into existing provision matrices. As this paper highlights, community-designed projects in education will be ideally suited to address post-war market failures that leave children with few options for gaining an education or generating future income.

IV. SCHOOLING AS SAFETY: AN EXAMPLE FROM WEST POINT

The More than Me Foundation, a US and Liberian registered non-profit, works with girls and other young people in West Point to provide tuition, educational supplies, and social support. A grass-roots organization, the non-profit has local staff based in West Point as well as partnerships with other community groups (Patterson-Stein 2011). The youth supported by More than Me are bright, intelligent, at risk, and by no means unique. While on a recent visit to meet with More than Me's field staff to conduct surveys and help develop new programs, the risk of girls who are at home nowhere but left to survive everywhere was constantly on display. More than Me's focus on girls—who are at risk for both commercial and sexual exploitation and are more likely to be moved from one caregiver to another—has yielded improvements in welfare, self-esteem, and social skills (Patterson-Stein 2012). More than Me staff work with parents and caregivers both to explain the importance of educating young girls and to find ways of working around financial dependence on selling.

A recent survey of the students and parents or guardians in More than Me's scholarship program found that not only were all of the young people in the program previously out of school, many were living with extended family members. At least eight girls and several mothers admitted to exchanging sex for money, food, or other favors. Internal displacement during the war has left the present generation of parents without skills or an education, making it difficult for their children to lead normal lives.

Research on the returns to education has produced little consensus on *how* schooling produces consistent gains. Studies from the last 40 years have questioned whether education acts as a signal to employers that someone has skills and if it simply pays off through increased productivity, in addition to whether individual gains provide "positive externalities" in the form of societal gains (Spence 1973; Becker 1965; Pritchett 2001). Within

this debate, quasi-experimental, qualitative, and randomized studies have produced significant evidence that investment in primary and girls' education produces income gains, improvements to human capital, and positive spillover effects. A 2010 paper estimates the average rate of return from an additional year of schooling to be 10 percent (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2010). Another report suggests that the education of girls has a positive causal effect on wages, sexual behavior, fertility, and infant mortality (Glennerster and Takavarasha 2012). Indeed, the "girl effect," the idea that projects focusing on girls yield high returns, has become a rallying cry for much of the NGO sector as evidence suggests small investments bring relatively large gains. The situation is more complicated when the role of education is extended beyond learning, income gains, or positive externalities to include bringing stability to a young person's life.

While the right to education is enshrined in international law and a growing body of case law, internally displaced persons (IDPs) continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in accessing this right (Rhoades 2012). Liberia is no exception. According to the most recent UN Millennium Development Goals Report, the net enrollment ratio for primary education is 49.3 percent, well short of the country's goal of 100 percent enrollment and the Liberian Government's compulsory primary education efforts (Konneh 2010). In addition, many more young people are beyond primary school age but have missed out on those years of basic education due to conflict and ensuing displacement (Walker, Wood, and Allemano 2009). Given traditional cultural norms surrounding gender roles, young women are at a disadvantage in accessing education. Despite the seemingly optimistic increase in gender parity in recent years, this change is unfortunately due to a decrease in male enrollment rather than an expansion of the education system (Watkins 2010).

The government of Liberia is endeavoring to provide for those persons in situations of protracted displacement. In November 2004, Liberia adopted the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement into national legislation. Principle 23 speaks specifically to the responsibility of the state to ensure access to education for IDPs, asserting that education should be free and compulsory at the primary level with special efforts made toward the full and equal participation of women and girls (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2004). Additionally, Liberia is signatory to the Kampala Convention of the African Union, which confers upon states the obligation to protect and assist IDPs, including Article 9, the provision of educational services (African Union 2009). President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been vocal about her support for national education and plans to increase investment in this sector.[2] These are steps in the

[2] For example, see Ellen Johnson Sirleaf 2010.

right direction but still fall far short of addressing the educational crisis in Liberia.

While Liberia does offer free public primary schooling, accessibility is severely limited and teachers are notoriously underpaid and known to accept various favors for grades. The costs of associated fees—such as uniforms, shoes, and supplies—are also unaffordable for many families (US Department of State 2012). There are several private schools in and around West Point, but the direct costs to attend school and pay for supplies, a uniform, and shoes totals approximately US$250 annually. Ongoing, indirect costs—such as upkeep for uniforms and shoes, transportation, and meals—create additional barriers. Neither public nor private schooling that requires material and uniform fees, not to mention tuition, is an option in a country where almost 70 percent of the population works in the informal economy and many people earn between US$1 and $2 a day (Liberia Institute of Statistics 2011). The opportunity cost of sending a young person to school is also prohibitive for many families. While most caregivers recognize the importance of learning to read and write, the income lost from having a child attend school rather than work and the lack of employment options for graduating students creates further disincentives. Recognizing the direct, indirect, and opportunity costs to accessing education provides insight on the low attrition rates in West Point.

The aunt of Musu, one of the girls in More than Me's program, explained during a survey why she had little enthusiasm for sending Musu to school: "That girl is nothing but trouble for me. She needs to be selling. I cannot afford to just feed her and then have her disrespect me. I will send her back to her mother [in the interior] if she does not learn how to work." Caregivers' economic dependence on these children creates a lack of social support for education, even when there is an acknowledgement of the value of going to school. The few hundred Liberian dollars (approximately US$4-6) per day a child can earn by selling peanuts, water, or candy are often a more immediate need for the post-war displaced in Liberia. This dependence is often accompanied by a sense of alienation: many caregivers reported that their responsibilities for children passed to them were a constant strain.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that, although investment in Liberia's education sector is essential to helping girls like Musu learn to read and write, simply going to school is not going to make the lives of young people in Liberia better. Lack of education is intertwined with many of the other problems facing internally displaced persons.

The post-war generation in Liberia will be able to make the most of an education only if it is combined with social support through mentoring, recreation programs, safe houses, and a community network. The More than Me Foundation is taking this

approach in West Point by providing scholarships, a sports program open to all children, and a partnership with the West Point Women Organization, which provides female role models a place to congregate and an engaged social support base in the community. By actively seeking community input and hiring community members to help run and design programs, community-driven organizations offer dynamic services that adjust to life as it exists on the ground. Education is the first step in helping children stuck in the post-conflict displacement limbo—where the ideas of home and family are not just fluid, but ambiguous—to gain skills, learn, and eventually contribute to the rebuilding of Liberia. However, if the only time these children are under a roof, eating, or receiving positive reinforcement is while they are in class, education is not enough.

V. CONCLUSION

A policy of increased cooperation and open dialogue with community-based NGOs, such as More than Me, will help bolster the Liberian government's efforts to promote education access and gender parity. In August of 2012, More than Me representatives met with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to voice the concerns of children in West Point and to work with the Liberian government to secure a lease for a building to create a safe house and mentoring center. This level of access and openness helps promote the still fragile post-war government by showing that it can be responsive to immediate and complex needs. This new center will create opportunities for young women to attend school, build relationships, create safe spaces to share problems and get advice, and help develop and strengthen natural support networks within the community.

For many young people in Liberia, caregiver economic dependence and financial instability are just two barriers to education access. The emotional and, in some cases, physical stress that many children experience will not be alleviated immediately by education. The key to supporting young people, who must deal with post-conflict displacement, is not to pick and choose one approach over another but to provide integrated services that offer stability to young people in transition—not just physically, but socially and emotionally as well. However, the evidence on the gains of education for girls suggests that schooling can provide a route to a life beyond the present circumstances. This makes gender parity strategies in the design and implementation of any education program critical.

The armed conflicts in Liberia brought 14 years of displacement to the country. For the young people of Liberia, the displacement continues. This generation is being brought up in a state of flux, and further study is needed to gain insight on these children. Girls, like Musu, who are being passed around between family and friends, between the interior of Liberia and Monrovia, need more than just remedial skills. A holistic approach—one that integrates a range of social, psychological, medical, and

educational support—is essential to providing young people with the stability needed to grow and learn. Understanding how to design, implement, and evaluate community-led projects is critical for reaching girls in Musu's position. In a decentralized and diverse environment, where a large youth population can create negative externalities, the focus of ongoing research should be on the potential returns from community-driven development to better inform project design and to mitigate the ongoing social and economic impacts of internal displacement on young people in Liberia.

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