

Session: Public Participation in Action – A Real Tool for Rising Effectiveness in SEA

Bullets and Lapa: SEA Participation in Liberia

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Abstract

In post-conflict and fragile contexts, public participatory processes serve as a powerful tool for building social cohesion in war-stricken communities. Amidst deeply imbedded social trauma and residual distrust, public participation during Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) can provide a space for high-risk and marginalised stakeholders to renegotiate their post-war identities. In rural and peri-urban Liberia women, ex-combatants and youth are increasingly taking ownership of their communities' socio-economic development. Through participatory processes, they are being invited to provide input into the design of development projects; an opportunity that has been historically reserved to an elite group of stakeholders such as town chiefs; local authorities; and international actors such as multinational companies, the United Nations, and NGOs.

Today, more than a decade after the country's civil war has ended, Liberia's high natural resource endowment has the immense potential to serve as a blessing, not a curse. Used correctly, public participation can serve not only as an unintended peace brokering tool that rebuilds the social fabric of conflict-affected communities, but also as a building block for a stronger and more informed set of stakeholders who are prepared to exercise their decision-making agency.

As such, conflict-sensitive and gender-sensitive public participation serves as a tool that can provide a real opportunity for war-affected communities to maximize the social benefit they can yield from development projects. It also enhances local ownership, stability and peace; key components for a project to be successful in a post-conflict or fragile country.

Introduction

“Don't invite a spider to a party that is underwater.” – Liberian proverb

The way a country manages its natural resource management strategy is a powerful indicator of its potential to progress and develop. As is the case with many developing countries with a high natural resource endowment, however, Liberia suffered the curse of a natural resource-fueled civil war. Today, the country is characterized by a weak governance system where incidences of corruption and mismanagement of public funds continue to infiltrate several layers of the country's national, regional and local institutions. In addition, serious constraints in public services and infrastructure and high rates of poverty are amongst rural and urban communities are amongst the country's challenges; with 76% of the population living below the poverty line of US\$1 a day and 52% living in extreme poverty of under US\$0.50 a day.

Foreign investors, particularly in the field of the extractive industries and agri-business industries (e.g. off-shore oil exploration companies, mining companies and palm oil and rubber producers) now lead the revival of Liberia's export-related industry. In an effort to attract foreign investment and boost Liberia's post-war economy, the Liberian government has granted numerous mineral and land concessions across the country. These actors, however, are capitalizing on a highly complex and under-regulated operational terrain. It is within the context of these constraints that Liberia seeks to harness and govern its natural resources to maximize local benefits.

Post-conflict Liberia: Trying-oh

Over a decade has elapsed since the end of Liberia's resource-fueled civil war. From 1989-2003 this sub-Saharan west African country, richly endowed with minerals such as iron ore, diamonds, gold and other resources such as timber, oil palm and rubber, was entrenched in violent armed subversion. The conflict endured for 14 years, amidst a context of political volatility; extreme corruption; economic strife; chronic poverty, and extreme social atrocities. In its wake, this protracted wave of civil conflict left the population physically displaced, psychologically traumatized, and impoverished.

Today, Liberia finds itself in a state of relative peace and stability. The country, however, is ranked close to the bottom of countries in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI), at 174th out of 187. Mid-term post-war recovery efforts have been largely led by international actors. Multilateral organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, as well as several international and local NGOs are directly implementing sustainable development programmes across the country to address unemployment, low levels of education and vocational skills, gender-based violence, and low agricultural production. It is within this context that when asked how they are doing, a typical Liberian response is often: "Trying-oh."

Liberians crave a new narrative: one that does not equate their country's natural resources with conflict, but instead with local ownership; development; empowerment; and peace. The purpose of this paper is to communicate the critical role that vulnerable and high-risk stakeholders such as women, youth and ex-combatants, play in determining the success of a development project in this post-conflict context. More particularly, this paper aims to show how the active participation of these stakeholders in the design of a project can yield opportunities for peace and stability, essential conditions for companies to operate. The two case studies below are used below to illustrate this point.

1. Medina #2, Grand Cape Mount: No holiday for the stomach

Understanding the role of women in peacebuilding is key for the success of a development project in a post-conflict or fragile context. In the case of Liberia, the "Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace" - a campaign led by Nobel-prize winning laureate Leymah Gbowee - played an instrumental role in bringing an end to the country's civil conflict in 2003. The campaign involved thousands of local women engaged in non-violent protests. In 2005, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the country's first female head of state in Africa, was elected as President of Liberia, and re-elected in 2011. Under her leadership, Liberia was named winner of the UN Millennium Development Goal three (MDG 3) award in 2010 for outstanding leadership, commitment and progress toward the achievement of MDG 3 through the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment across the country.

It is worthy to note, however, that in addition to the President and key female leaders within the country, Liberian women at large play an integral role in peacebuilding and reconciliation amongst their own communities. Inviting women to participate in the design of a development project is therefore a strong requisite for a company's operational success in the country, as it ensures peace.

As part of a UN-led Community Based Recovery and Development programme, I managed the implementation of sustainable livelihood projects across Liberia, including one in Medina #2, a village in Grand Cape Mount County. Community members of this village participated in a six-month agricultural project aimed at rehabilitating the rice swamps in their village. The project provided farmers with farming inputs such as tools, seeds and fertilizer and training. During several monitoring and evaluation field visits to Medina # 2, many of the farmers complained that the rice yield was much lower than it had

been in the previous harvest. Focus group discussions with the female farmers, particularly, revealed that a multinational company with oil palm and rubber concessions was operating in close proximity to their rice swamp. The women expressed fear that the low rice yield and infected rice crop was due to chemical spills or other project-related run-off contaminating the groundwater used to irrigate their rice swamp. The company had launched an ESIA conducted by an environmental consulting group, however the women in Medina #2 reported that they had not been invited to participate in any discussions regarding the plan for the project or during this ESIA. They also reported that they were unaware about the company's project until men in their village and neighboring villages, simply through hearsay, began to flock to the project site to seek employment opportunities.

In addition to the project's perceived effect on agricultural activities - the women's opposition toward the project was exacerbated due to the lack of alternative livelihood options available to them, such as jobs from the project. Given that rice was being largely grown for subsistence purposes, in Medina #2 the perceived threat the company's project posed not only had implications on their income-generating capacity, however also on their overall household food security. Listening to the women's concerns over food security over the course of several visits, I was reminded by a slogan I had seen written on the back of a taxi in Monrovia: "No holiday for the stomach." Loss of farmland, lack of compensation, poorly paid project-related jobs and other social and environmental concerns created immediate upheaval.

By not inviting women to provide input in the project design or negotiate the terms of the project to meet gender-sensitive concerns, the company had missed an opportunity to invest in early trust-building and creating a sense of local ownership. Gender-sensitive participatory processes were absent in this case, and the wide-spread grievances expressed by project-affected communities complicated the operational environment for the company, while also putting its reputation at risk.

2. Tubmanberg, Bomi: CLOHRY

Youth unemployment is often understood as an outcome of conflict and war. However, it may also be understood as a cause of the very political, economic and social circumstances which incite conflict, exacerbate regional insecurity, and eventually lead to war. In Liberia, the role of youth - and particularly unemployed youth - played a pivotal role in the civil conflict, as they were recruited to fight by both the government and the rebel groups, providing them with a sense of identity and livelihood that was unavailable otherwise in a time of extreme volatility and protracted conflict. Today, in post-conflict Liberia, youth are a potential resource for economic growth and social development if they are productively engaged. If not, they could be a source for extreme levels of social tension and conflict and in extreme cases, a threat to security.

The project on Creating Livelihood Opportunities for High Risk Youth (CLOHRY) aimed to promote alternative livelihood and enhance employability of high-risk youth and affected communities in hotspots areas of the rubber plantation project by the multinational company referenced in the above case study in Bomi and Grand Cape Mount Counties. The project sought to offer: (1) Peace Building and Leadership Training; (2) Agriculture and Vocational Skills Training and (3) Community-Based Micro Enterprise Development.

Topics addressed at a CLOHRY workshop that I participated in 2010 included segments on leadership and peace building education; agricultural and vocational skills training; community based micro-enterprise development; national ownership and sustainability; land tenure issues; rural exodus; and local cooperatives. Participants at the event included local Paramount Chiefs, rural women's structure Chairpersons, District Commissioners, County Agricultural Coordinators, Superintendents, UN representatives, national and international civil society organizations, youth leaders of the Federation of

Liberian Youth (FLY) from Bomi and Grand Cape Mount Counties, and representative from the company's palm oil plantation.

The project targeted high-risk youth early in the stages of the development project. In doing so it recognized that youth and ex-combatants are creative and destructive forces in Liberia; makers and breakers of society. Their early engagement was integral to ensure that the potential risk of opposition toward the project due to perceived lack of benefits was proactively quelled.

Conclusions and Recommendations: Dodging the bullet, tightening the lapa

The two cases above convey that women, youth and ex-combatants in Liberia are highly influential stakeholders, whose grievances directed toward a project can be potentially mitigated or escalated depending on the level of engagement during SEA and ESIA. Investing in early engagement through participation could enhance the capacity of women and youth to be competitive in gaining employment; alleviate some of the traditional burdens they face, and offset some of the impacts of development projects, thus mitigating community level conflict and acting as an investment in peace.

Exercises such as conducting a proactive rapid gender assessment during the scoping phase as well as mapping the youth and ex-combatants labour market are recommended. Gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive participatory processes streamlined throughout SEA and ESIA is integral for securing the social license to operate in Liberia.

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