

Rebuilding education from scratch in Liberia

by Diana Quick

After 14 years of on-off civil war, 150,000 deaths and the displacement of almost the entire population, Liberia's education system lies in ruins. Donors must work with the recently-elected government to make education for all a reality.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children is dedicated to ensuring that all children and youth, particularly young refugees and IDPs, have access to quality, appropriate education both during and after displacement.¹

The Women's Commission introduced the Global Survey on Education in Emergencies in 2004, a landmark document on education in emergencies.² In December 2005 a delegation from the Commission visited Liberia and interviewed government officials – including Africa's first female head of state, President-elect Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, community organisations, educators and parents.

In Liberia corruption has been rampant at all levels of government. Infrastructure, including school buildings, teacher training colleges, latrines and roads, has been decimated. There is a dearth of trained teachers (especially female teachers), the curriculum is outdated and there are not enough textbooks or school supplies. Data on enrolment numbers is unavailable and children and youth have missed years of schooling.

Education levels are shaped by the legacy of war. The education system was more fully functional 25 years ago than it is now, with the result that the adult literacy rate is higher than the child rate. During the conflict refugees received better education than IDPs due to the discrepancy in access to humanitarian relief and funding sources for the two populations. Education was disrupted for so long that today around two-thirds of those enrolled in primary school are over-aged:

having grown up without access to education they are now too old to sit in classes with first-graders. In secondary schools 45% of boys and 27% of girls are aged between 20 and 24. Peace has not brought an end to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. Girls are harassed by male teachers or classmates and when travelling to and from school. Fewer girls than boys enrol and they are more likely to drop out.

As they value education, both refugees and IDPs are reluctant to leave camps because, unlike places of origin, they have functioning schools. This has resulted in the separation of families. Refugee children have been left in Guinea where they are able to attend secondary school, while the rest of the family returns to Liberia, where there are very few secondary schools. To encourage repatriation, schooling needs to be available in the areas of origin, and schools in the camps need to be closed.

Liberia faces many constraints in its quest for stability:

- the absence of local authorities, including administrative and law enforcement institutions
- lack of funding for rehabilitation and reintegration of demobilised ex-combatants – leaving them vulnerable to recruitment by non-state actors within and across Liberia's borders
- lack of property restitution mechanisms: many returnees are likely to come home to find their land and houses occupied by ex-combatants and others
- economic activities are limited and unemployment exceeds 80%.

Liberia must rebuild its education system in a transparent manner and eliminate corruption. The peace, stability and economic development of the country depend on an educated workforce with access to jobs that pay a living wage. The new government is taking the right steps in working to eliminate corruption and involve the people of Liberia in the development of the education system. Parents and students see education as one of their top priorities.

The Women's Commission delegation called for:

- the government of Liberia to commit at least 10% of its budget to education
- donors to pledge long-term assistance, including – at least until government capacity is restored – for the salaries of teachers and for incentive payments for volunteers filling gaps in the absence of certified teachers
- building education facilities and infrastructure in and around home communities in conjunction with, if not prior to, the withdrawal of support from IDP and refugee camps
- UNHCR and UNICEF to team up to provide basic education materials in the return package which a family or individual receives when leaving a camp
- NGOs and the UN to coordinate collection and use of education data: without accurate information on numbers of school-age children and youth in specific geographic areas, the government cannot determine where to refurbish or build schools and where teachers are most needed, nor can they ensure accurate disbursement of funds

- evaluation of accelerated learning programmes in total and disaggregated by sex regarding learning, retention and success in passing the West African Examination Council exams
- the government and international community to offer more support to teacher training in refugee and IDP camps and to offer incentives to encourage teachers to return – perhaps asking communities to provide food, housing and childcare
- urgent revision and roll-out of a new curriculum
- mobile teacher training units
- guarantees that teacher training programmes focus on human/women's rights, include a code of conduct for educators and ensure zero tolerance of in-school sexual abuse
- culturally appropriate community sensitisation projects to educate communities and parents about the importance of girls' education and the harmful



nature of such traditional practices as early marriage

- measures to encourage girls and women with children to continue in school (allowing them to bring their babies to class and/or providing child care)
- encouragement of community participation in improving school facilities, building furniture and latrines and supporting teachers
- provision of adequate latrine facilities for girls in all

schools: these must include washrooms, not just toilets.

This is a summary of Help Us Help Ourselves: Education in the Conflict to Post-Conflict Transition in Liberia, by Lori Heninger, Carolyn Makinson, Faye Richardson, Miranda Kaiser and Julia Aker Duany, March 2006, www.womenscommission.org/pdf/lr_ed.pdf Diana Quick is the Commission's Director of Communications. Email: diana@womenscommission.org

1. See FMR22 www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR22/FMR2203.pdf
2. www.womenscommission.org/pdf/Ed_Emerg.pdf