

Human Rights are relevant for all citizens in Liberia

HUMAN RIGHTS VOLUNTEERS in rural Liberia



Lessons Learned of a training programme

A joint project of
the National Human Rights Centre for Liberia and
the Special Programme on Africa of Amnesty International Netherlands

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Acronyms

- NHRCL • National human Rights Center of Liberia
- SPA • Special Programme on Africa
- AI • Amnesty International
- NGO • Non-Governmental Organisation
- CBO • Community-Based Organisation
- CCC • County Coordinating Committee

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INTRODUCTION

This training project for rural human rights volunteers in Liberia became known as the Liberia Pilot Project (The Project) because it marked a new departure for Amnesty International (AI). AI realised its traditional strategy of putting pressure on governments was diminishing in influence, largely for geo-political reasons, and this was particularly so in the context of fragile situations such as 1998 Liberia. The organisation began to experiment with strengthening the human rights movement in Africa as a new strategy. Liberia was chosen and this document reflects the lessons learned.

It has been an important learning experience for AI and its partner, the National Human Rights Center of Liberia (NHRCL). This report aims to present this learning in the hope that others can benefit. It is intended for African human rights NGOs wishing to expand their work into rural communities; other African NGOs, including those involved in development, which want to incorporate human rights advocacy into their community based activities; international donors who support such activities; donors who may be interested in pursuing the project's work in Liberia; and other parts of the AI movement considering similar activities.

The Project has demonstrated that training and supporting a volunteer network of human rights activists is a viable strategy which can be highly effective in tackling abuses. By integrating it into existing

community-based organisations, it has proven resilient and relevant in the difficult context of the Liberian conflict.

For AI, it provides an excellent example of what an AI Section, in this case the Dutch Section's Special Programme on Africa (SPA) acting semi-autonomously from the movement's International Secretariat, can do to strengthen the human rights movement in another country. This fits well with AI's recently expanded mission¹. It allows the organisation to find a new role in tense and fragile states, which goes beyond its more traditional roles of monitoring abuses and campaigning internationally to ensure these are addressed.

Within Liberia, the Project indicates how national human rights organisations, in this case grouped together into the NHRCL, can work in a systematic and sustainable way to train and support rural human rights activists. It is an example of how a good partnership between national and international organisations can develop culturally specific strategies and practices which permit effective work with rural volunteers in the Liberian conflict. These may well be transferable to other conflict or fast changing environments.

The Project's initiative to promote human rights awareness and encourage monitoring and reporting of violations was widely welcomed by the rural population, including active support from women, youth and children. It has formed a foundation and catalyst for the growth of the human rights movement in rural Liberia.

¹ As agreed at its International Council Meeting in Dakar in 2001 and developed in its integrated strategic plan for 2004-2010.

It represents the beginning of a community based rural programme for monitoring and reporting human rights violations in Liberia. Rural communities had previously not had the opportunity to take collective action against human rights violations; they had felt powerless, depending on Monrovia-based human rights organisations or lawyers to act on their behalf where the security forces committed human rights violations with impunity.

The Project was born after thorough extensive consultation which led to a real partnership. Sharing information on the strategies and approaches used by similar organisations in Africa had a positive impact on the quality of the programme and allowed for the development of directly relevant approaches.

The Project continues. In March 2004 the Project since its inception in 1998 to 2004 was evaluated. The evaluation's key findings are summarised in this introduction and inform the lessons learned. The full evaluation report is available on request².

The document is set out in two sections:

Section One A detailed description of the Project, its context and implementation.

Section Two Lessons learned.

² LPP Evaluation, Tornolah Varpilah and Rob Watson, March 2004. Full report is available on request. Please write to aloysiustoe@yahoo.com or p.vanderhorst@amnesty.nl. LPP Evaluation, Tornolah Varpilah and Rob Watson, March 2004. Full report is available on

SECTION ONE

1 WHY THIS PROJECT?

In 1993, Amnesty International began to re-evaluate its work in the light of changes taking place in Africa because the “Cold War” era had ended. The human rights situation deteriorated further as the superpowers withdrew, economic development slowed down and political instability in Africa increased as a result of weakening state structures. This led AI to question its traditional strategy of exerting external pressure on governments. Would increased human rights activism within Africa not be more effective? And, should AI not also get involved in strengthening the human rights movement in Africa? AI Netherlands set up the Special Programme on Africa (SPA) in 1994 to seek answers to these questions.

It first started looking at strategy development and introducing new approaches to Africa within AI, but soon concentrated on strengthening the broader human rights movement in Africa. Gradually SPA began to focus on the promotion of human rights more specifically in rural Africa. This comprised both raising awareness and mobilising local communities to respond to violations of their rights.

In 1998, Liberia was selected as the country for a comprehensive pilot project to find ways for implementing this rural focus. Campaigning against human rights violations from outside had little

impact as President Charles Taylor's government seemed impervious to such pressure. And, although AI feared the space available for human rights activities *within* Liberia would remain small, it decided to encourage and strengthen these activities. The logic was that if it looked unlikely to succeed in the short-term, it would at least be an investment for the future. Leading Liberian human rights activists highlighted the insecurity and lawlessness in the rural areas and this led to a shared focus on raising human rights awareness and mobilising people in rural Liberia.

1.1 The Project in a nutshell

The Project is a partnership between AI Netherlands and the NHRCL aimed at raising human rights awareness and mobilising people in rural areas to claim their rights and resist abuse of power. It was expected this cooperation would also lead to capacity building of human rights organisations at the national level.

The main activity is creating a network of human rights volunteers at community level in three Counties. People already active in local groups and organisations in their communities, such as religious groups, community development and women's groups³ were offered training in:

- raising human rights awareness;
- mobilising people against injustice;
- monitoring and reporting human rights violations.

³ For the sake of simplicity we are using the term Community Based Organisations (CBOs) for all local organisations and groups throughout this document.

Trainers selected from each of the Counties received an initial training of trainers and went on to provide training to volunteer activists. Training was also provided to some local theatre groups to support the volunteers in their community based activities. In each County a County Coordinating Committee (CCC) consisting of 3-5 local NGOs organised the training and follow up meetings of volunteers, provided support to the volunteers and helped coordinate their activities. A Project Officer provides overall coordination of the Project who in turn receives support from other NHRCL members and staff . He has responsibility for developing new activities and has organised several training workshops for representatives of human rights organisations at the national level.

1.2 The political and human rights context

Before looking at the Project itself some basic background information on the political and human rights context in Liberia might be useful.

Descendants of slaves returning to Africa from the US created Liberia as an independent state in 1847. Until 1980 it was relatively stable and economically prosperous. However, the deep division between the ruling class of former slaves mainly based in Monrovia, and the original inhabitants living in poverty in the “hinterland” persisted and remains a source of division today.

The country’s potential wealth has been exploited to the benefit of the political elite and foreign companies. The basic needs of the population have been ignored as land and concessions have been sold to the

highest bidder. Plantations, gold, diamonds, iron ore, fish, and timber have been exploited to pay political favours and support war and destruction within Liberia and against neighbours.

Samuel Doe seized power in a military coup in 1980, largely because of dissatisfaction caused by neglect of the rural people. His initial popularity with the majority population was short-lived as he resorted to repression and because the social and economic situation deteriorated rapidly.

In December 1989, Charles Taylor invaded Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire with a small rebel militia. It was the start of an era of intermittent fighting between various factions, sometimes numbering as many as seven, often formed on the basis of ethnicity. Finally, on the 13th attempt a peace accord was brokered in 1996. However in April that year intense fighting destroyed most of Monrovia and its surrounding areas. In early 1995 UNHCR estimated that the conflict had caused 150,000 deaths, 850,000 had taken refuge in neighbouring countries and 1 million were internally displaced within Liberia, from an estimated pre-war population of 2.6 million.

In August 1997 former faction leader Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia.

In September 1998, when the first preparations for the Project began, there had been no fighting for more than 2 years, but respect for the rule of law remained weak. West African peacekeepers remained until the end of 1998. President Taylor's government never fully complied

with the peace accord refusing for example to form an army and police force composed of fighters from all former armed factions. On the contrary, his own militias and security forces were increasingly involved in harassing civilians. They tried to silence political opponents, the media and human rights activists with threats and torture, and some were killed. Constitutional rights such as the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and to a fair trial were brutally violated by the security forces, acting with impunity. Radio stations and newspapers were closed down at will without notice or recourse to the law. The offices of newspapers, human rights organisations, and opposition leaders were searched and often vandalized and the most vocal human rights activists were threatened and forced to leave the country.

It was in these very difficult circumstances that the Project started in the third quarter of 2000. A baseline assessment was carried out in two of the three selected Counties and in 2001 the first training of trainers and training of human rights volunteers took place. Initially, the success was remarkable despite the constraints.

During 2001 fighting resumed as the Liberians United for Reconstruction and Democracy (LURD), launched a guerrilla war in Lofa County. This led to renewed displacement of people and increasing repression on human rights activists which in turn affected the implementation of the Project. However, until March 2002 the training programme was implemented as planned. Then the Project Officer and 4 colleagues were arrested and detained for 4 days.

Using Guinea as a base, LURD's strength grew and they almost reached Monrovia in February 2002. A second rebel movement, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) was formed and invaded eastern Liberia from Côte d'Ivoire.

Neither government nor rebel groups showed the slightest regard for human rights. For example both rebel groups forcibly conscripted children and youth into their militias, committed rape and other forms of sexual violence against mainly girls and women. They also indiscriminately killed unarmed civilians, looted private property and destroyed social amenities. The vast majority of Liberians had (again) to flee their homes, which were then looted while they took shelter in internally displaced person (IDP) camps mostly around Monrovia. Apparently, in an effort to conceal human rights violations, and to commit further atrocities, the government of Liberia declared a state of emergency on two occasions. First in February 2002 when Monrovia was under military threat and in June 2003 after the Special Court for Sierra Leone attempted to arrest President Charles Taylor in Accra, Ghana.

In this increasingly tense security situation the Project Officer became one of the most vocal advocates and he was arrested in early November 2002. Fighting reached a climax in June-July 2003 and the Project Officer managed to escape from prison and flee to Ghana. After a new peace accord was brokered and Charles Taylor was forced to leave the country in August 2003, the Project Officer returned to Liberia in September and gradually resumed work from November. However, almost all the volunteers and trainers were still in IDP camps and most

of their parent organisations remained dissolved in April 2004 at the time of the Project evaluation which informs this report.

The August 2003 Accra Peace Agreement ushered in a National Transitional Government and the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force. Most of the 15,000 United Nations peacekeeping forces have been deployed throughout the country allowing civilians to move more freely. Disarmament and demobilisation is expected to commence in April 2004⁴. For the most part the three branches of government (the Judiciary, Legislative, and Executive) are not functioning beyond Monrovia. Rebel factions remained in control of the areas captured during the war, and IDPs feared returning until they were disarmed. The transitional period presents an opportunity for human rights organisations and civil society groups to help create a new Liberia in which the dignity of everyone is respected.

⁴The disarmament and demobilization was formally finalized by end October 2004.

2. DEVISING AND IMPLEMENTING THE PROJECT

2.1 Assessment and project design

SPA made an assessment in September 1998 – a period of relative political calm in Liberia. In consultation with 37 organisations and individuals from different parts of civil society they jointly identified the main human rights concerns, assessed the political context and the status of the human rights community. The information enabled them together to assess the viability of a project aiming to raise human rights awareness and to support the human rights movement in Liberia.

The idea of focusing the Project on raising human rights awareness among the long-suffering rural population came from Samuel Kofi Woods, who was at the time director of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) in Liberia. He had remained an outspoken human rights activist throughout the civil war.

The main conclusions of the assessment were:

- Ill-disciplined security forces and more general abuse of power resulted in widespread human rights abuse especially in rural areas;
- A lack of human rights awareness in rural areas was hampering people's ability to resist abusive use of power;

- While the media and human rights activists were seriously restricted in what they could make public, there was still some space for exposing violations and dialogue with the government;
- There was also a clear need for human rights training for the security forces, but with no apparent political will to tackle the issue, the Project partners concluded it was not timely to address it;
- Human rights groups were already active on various issues, including, raising awareness of children's and women's rights and of the rights of prisoners, providing legal services, researching, monitoring and documenting human rights violations, human rights education and advocacy;
- Besides one organisation with 2 branch offices in rural areas, almost all activities of the human rights groups were focused on Monrovia. It was also noted that there was little attempt to have sustained and participatory activities in rural areas and that many human rights groups were very weak – some seeming to focus on fundraising rather than a programme of activities;
- The human rights community in Liberia was focused on denouncing violations rather than promoting human rights through raising awareness or lobbying the government.

This assessment informed the initial proposal, which was drafted in close consultation with Samuel Kofi Woods who was based in the Netherlands at the time. The proposal was discussed with the NHCRL and two other human rights networks during July 1999. The NHCRL went on to develop a Plan of Action, which called for a change away from capacity building for Monrovia-based NGOs towards a rural focused human rights programme, although some training of human rights organisations in the capital was included. In September 1999 a workshop developed a 3-year project proposal and by November 1999 a final outline of the Project was completed.

Based on the assessment and on advice of AI's International Secretariat, SPA decided to choose NHRCL as the partner organisation.

This umbrella had been formed in 1997 on the initiative of the JPC to combine the efforts of some leading human rights NGOs. Thanks to support from the Dutch Inter-Church Aid (DIA) (now ACT Netherlands), Taata Oforu, a human rights consultant from Ghana, was recruited to strengthen the capacity of the Centre and its member organisations.

The thorough preparation took time, but it seems the Project benefited from its emphasis on consultation. It certainly helped to familiarise Monrovia's human rights organisations with the Project and alert them to the need for work to be done in rural counties. It also helped ensure that the strategies and approaches adopted were relevant. For example, SPA realised it would need to shift its focus away from the urban human rights groups towards CBOs and other rural based organisations, if it were to work effectively with rural communities.

2.2 Implementation

The SPA and the NHRCL jointly developed the Project, which was launched late in 2000. From the outset SPA emphasised that it should not be considered as a donor organisation just financing a project implemented by the NHRCL, but that SPA and NHRCL should be partners. Subsequently SPA was involved in developing and closely monitoring the implementation of the Project. A formal partnership agreement was signed in 1999.

The plan was to create a network of human rights volunteers in rural areas. Rather than trying to create a network of individuals it was felt it might be more sustainable if people already active in their community and belonging to a local organisation or group such as community development organisations, religious groups or women's groups were trained. That way, it was hoped activities could continue beyond the pilot phase, even if no further funding were available. Moreover, human rights volunteers who were already active in their own community would be familiar with the local cultural and social dynamics and so better able to assess the problems and possibilities for change within their communities.

The Project involved volunteers in three kinds of activities:

- *raising human rights awareness:*
The aim was to ensure people knew their rights to enable them to resist abuse of power by the authorities and to claim their rights. It was agreed that this process should also aim to

promote equality, tolerance and respect for diversity, including gender, religion and ethnicity.

2. *mobilising communities to claim their rights:*

Volunteers were expected to play a facilitating role in this rather than acting on behalf of others. This might include assisting the community or groups within it to find ways to demand their rights are protected and respected.

(It had been intended that this activity would include paralegal advice. However, given the lack of access to a functioning legal system in most parts of rural Liberia, it was decided to focus on community mobilisation. This issue is reviewed under lessons learned 21).

3. *monitoring and reporting human rights violations:*

Volunteers were expected to regularly write reports about the human rights situation in their community and give these either to the CCC, one of the trainers or directly to a visitor from the NHRCL. They were asked to report serious human rights violations immediately.

Three counties were selected to start building the volunteer networks during this pilot phase. In those counties an assessment was made of the level of awareness about human rights to be able to measure the impact after some years (which unfortunately has not yet been possible because of the new war). To ensure the trainers understood the nature of the problems and the economic, social and cultural context, trainers from the same county did the training.

The process of training trainers started in early 2001⁵. This was seen as essential given the lack of trainers with a human rights background in the rural areas. An international trainer of trainers worked closely with two Liberian trainers (knowledgeable about both human rights and the situation in rural Liberia) to develop a training programme for trainers and volunteers. A trainer of trainers with solid human rights background could not be found within Liberia.

Fifteen trainers embarked on a six-week training of trainers course with the middle two weeks consisting of practical activities. Only one trainer did not complete the course.

(An outline of the training programme for the trainers is included in Appendix 2).

Volunteers had an initial 6-day training and a follow up training after a few months. Three rounds of training workshops were planned for each county with subsequent follow up training.

The first round of volunteer training took place soon after the trainers completed their training, and two more rounds followed later that year and in 2002. The initial plan was to train 18 volunteers per workshop, but soon the project management team decided those groups would be too big for the new trainers (even though they worked in teams of three). Therefore the groups were split up into groups of 9. After the first round of training the project organisers concluded that one follow up training would not be sufficient, so the number of initial training workshops was decreased in order to be able to organise more follow up. In the end around 250 volunteers were trained. (An outline of the training programme for volunteers is included in Appendix 3).

⁵ This was slightly later than planned because of the absence of some key players.

To strengthen the rural base of the networks in each county a County Coordinating Committee (CCC) was created comprising up to 5 county-level NGOs from different backgrounds, for example women's groups or those involved in community development or human rights. One member represents the trainers on the CCC. The CCC is responsible for organising training workshops, selecting volunteers, coordinating the work of the trainers and keeping contact with the volunteers after the training.

The NHRCL recruited a Project Officer, Aloysius Toe, to coordinate the implementation of the Project. Based at the NHRCL office he received much support from the consultant and gradually other NHRCL staff assisted him. He reports to the NHRCL coordinator and board, and to the SPA coordinator.

In addition to the network of rural volunteers, the Project also included:

1. Promotion of the use of drama in human rights work in rural areas;
2. Production of simple materials to raise human rights awareness in rural areas;
3. Capacity building for Monrovia-based human rights organisations in the following areas:
 - Increasing knowledge and understanding of human rights and international and regional human rights standards,
 - Monitoring, fact-finding and documentation of human rights violations,

- Introducing human rights education in formal and non-formal education,
- Campaigning and lobbying,
- Strategic planning for human rights organisations.

Two theatre facilitators were contracted to provide drama and human rights training to two local theatre groups in each County. Two human rights activists assisted the theatre facilitators in designing and providing the theatre training. A total number of 60 persons participated in the drama workshops.

A chronology of the implementation of the Project is included in Appendix 1.

2.3 Evaluation

In April-May 2004, two independent consultants evaluated the Project. Many of their conclusions are reflected as lessons learned in this report.

The conflict made it impossible to assess the impact of the Project on communities and their awareness of human rights in any systematic way. Most of the communities where the Project has operated in the last two years have been displaced. However, the impact could be gauged through the activities and reports of volunteers and trainers (see some examples below). The evaluation therefore focused on assessing the effectiveness of the strategies and methods used.

Overall the evaluation was very positive and this lessons learned report starts with a summary of some of the key findings (see Introduction). Two other findings also seem worth mentioning:

The programme has been highly cost effective. Most of the AI funds were directed towards training and strengthening rural CBOs or NGOs working in rural areas, as other costs were kept to a minimum. This was possible because many participated without payment and the amounts paid locally for costs such as resource persons, trainers, and venues were prudent.

However, it is unlikely that a network of rural human rights activists can be sustained without funding in the foreseeable future. The evaluation team suggests that the community-based activities of volunteers can be sustained through local resources, but the training and support to volunteers and the essential costs to run the network, will still require outside funding. It sees considerable merit in the idea of supporting volunteers working in their own local organisations, which are already supported by other organisations and networks. The number of volunteers trained and active, and the enthusiasm participating organisations have for the Project indicated the success of this approach.

Three examples of community action

(taken from project staff reports):

Tubmansburg City Security Checkpoints: In July 2001, several residents complained about the worsening security harassment around checkpoints. In particular, the Anti-Terrorist Unit (one of President Taylor's "elite troupes") had erected an obstructive checkpoint in the centre of the city. Like all checkpoints, this became a point of extortion and harassment of motorists, passengers and other citizens.

The volunteers, trainers and members of the County Coordinating Committee of the project in Bomi County decided to mobilise the community to get the barrier removed. After consultation with community leaders in Tubmansburg, a delegation of the community met with the county authorities. The delegation included members of the coordinating committee. This intervention prompted the county authorities (Superintendent and Mayor) to intercede with the security forces. The barrier was removed a few days after the community delegation met the county authorities.

Gbarnga, Bong County: In December 2001 a police commander killed an innocent and unarmed student accusing him of robbery. People from the county, led by students, wrote letters to county and national authorities asking for the arrest and prosecution of the police commander. After some days the

students organised a demonstration to present a petition to the city authorities. Security forces erected roadblocks to stop the demonstration but the demonstrators marched through them. The security forces reacted with violence and another student was killed. The National Police Director had to fly to Gbarnga to quell the tension and the officers that killed the students were arrested and detained in Monrovia. The student leaders organising the protests were all human rights volunteers trained in the Project.

Camps of Internally Displaced People: After initially being scattered fleeing the fighting, members of communities regrouped in the IDP camps. Trainers and volunteers continued their awareness raising activities in the camps. Also, with very little entertainment in those camps, the drama groups of the Project have been filling this gap by performing drama addressing issues like security, extortion and harassment by state security officers in the camps (for instance demanding money for a spot and a piece of UN plastic to build a shack).

SECTION TWO

3. LESSONS LEARNED

The Project is a practical example of how to work with local organisations introducing human rights activities in rural communities in a way that makes it relevant to them. Training and providing support to a volunteer network of human rights activists with the aim of empowering and encouraging them to demand protection and respect for their human rights is a viable model. It has proved to be an effective strategy with considerable resilience in difficult circumstances. The Liberia experience seems transferable to other countries in similar contexts.

For AI it provides an excellent example of what an AI Section can do to strengthen human rights movements in another country. This experience allows the organisation to examine appropriate roles for AI to play in fragile contexts like Liberia, beyond more traditional AI roles of research and international campaigning. This fits well with AI's new expanded mission and its strategic plan for 2004 to 2010.

The Project has been an important learning experience for AI and the NHRCL. By sharing these lessons, it is hoped they will inform others embarking on similar initiatives, whether they are African NGOs, international NGOs or other parts of the AI movement and potential funders. Given this wide audience, it is possible that some lessons may be more useful for some than for others.

3.1 Concept/strategy

1. *Training and supporting human rights volunteers within rural CBO's can be an effective strategy to mobilise people to defend their human rights, particularly in conflict situations.*

In Liberia, a previously untapped and undervalued human resource – rural volunteers – has become a useful vehicle for social change, raising awareness of human rights issues and taking action against abuses. The majority of the volunteers remained active after training, and even continued the work while displaced by the conflict.

2. *Working directly with CBOs to promote and protect human rights is effective and relevant.*

Providing human rights training to people already active in local organisations and groups means the human rights become integrated into existing community activities. Human rights become relevant for the communities if they recognise their own daily problems as such and when they see that problems translated into rights can help them to demand protection and respect of their rights. Using participatory methods and consultation at various stages gave the volunteers and the communities itself a voice, making the Project relevant to their needs.

3. *The need for a project to be rooted in the country's realities.*

It was vital for the Project to be managed from within Liberia. This guaranteed that the overall vision, the choice of issues to be addressed, the management structure as well as the way the Project is implemented were geared towards the local realities. It also provided a close oversight once the Project was functioning, as well as flexibility to adaptation in the light of new experience.

4. *Volunteers know how to make use of existing community structures.*

Training people who were already active in their community produced volunteers with close contact with local traditional structures and decision-making culture. Informally, volunteers were able to work with traditional leaders. They have seen the importance of including elders in their awareness raising activities. This makes human rights issues accessible and relevant to key players within the community, and brings the potential for sustained change.

5. *Many community development workers are keen to promote human rights!*

The Project and its network of volunteers have stimulated an amalgamation between social development and human

rights work at local level. Hundreds of development workers have been trained and supported in their efforts to take up human rights activities. For some the perception that human rights work is risky and detracts from normal duties remains, but the Project activities have generally been well received.

3.2 The preparation phase

6. *A real partnership is essential at the project development stage.*

Such a partnership is possible provided sufficient time is taken and efforts made to build the relationship. It requires a real commitment to joint decision-making and ownership and then can be a powerful alliance leading to effective programming.

7. *Time spent in preparation is worthwhile.*

It is essential to spend time understanding and assessing the national and local context and the needs of the target groups, if the project is to be relevant and bring value to those involved. It had a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of this Project. Broad and genuine consultation (within AI, within the NHRCL, the broader human rights community in Monrovia and with the communities themselves) was key at the preparatory stage.

It meant the Project and its intention to work in rural areas was better understood. This Project took 18 months from assessment to initial implementation.

8. *Broad consultation is essential.*

Consultation must go beyond the intended partners. The Project benefited from the input and experience of many organisations and individuals during the assessment and project development phases. Later, this was formalised by creating a Project Advisory Committee, in which representatives of other organisations (human rights, development and women's organisations) met with representatives of CCCs, trainers and volunteers to reflect on developing the volunteer activities and the challenges encountered.

9. *Start preparations with an open mind but aim for a clearly focused strategy.*

Not surprisingly, faced with many fundamental problems, the Liberians consulted wanted to improve everything at the same time. Obviously, this was not realistic. To retain effectiveness, it was necessary to accept the need for limited, clear and focused goals. For example, it was important not to expect too much of the volunteers. The limits also applied to the number of volunteers who could be trained as well as the sorts of issues which would be addressed.

3.3 Trainers

10. *Recruiting trainers for training of volunteers from local CBO's built support for the Project and its aims.*

The support of trainers selected from local organisations was invaluable, as was their local knowledge of language, power relationships and other sensitivities. Through their involvement in and understanding of the Project, they have been able to gain support at a County level, and even nationally when required. It may be difficult to find experienced trainers from within rural areas. Our experience showed that belonging to the community outweighed the importance of training experience.

We specified the following criteria for selecting trainers:

- *Must live or work in a rural village or town in the county and have clear knowledge and understanding of the local situation;*
- *Must have proven community leadership or activist experience;*
- *Must be active in a local organisation or group, such as a church or mosque, a community development organisation, a women's group or exercise a profession*

such as teacher, legal advisor, health worker, social worker or agricultural extension worker;

- Must be sponsored by an organisation that will provide the base support for the trainer's work;*
- Must be a long-standing member of the community with no immediate plans for relocation;*
- A proven good reputation in the communities concerned and good relations with people inside and outside those communities;*
- Good social and communication skills such as listening and respect for other views;*
- Must embrace and be prepared to raise awareness of equal rights for all sectors of the community, including gender sensitivity;*
- Willing to work under extreme conditions.*

11. *The advantages of using both national and international trainers.*

The use of high quality trainers (both national and international) for training of the volunteer trainers was worthwhile, as the broader experience complemented local knowledge and expertise. The international trainer drew on existing training manuals, and used training methodologies developed in other parts of Africa.

12. *The value of blending of theory and practice.*

The training methodology used was participatory, and drew on the experience and abilities of participants. The practical approach included visiting a jail, using role-plays and problem solving. A 2-week break in between training modules proved helpful for participants to apply what they had learned and gain experience in their communities.

13. *The value of developing training materials specifically for the Project.*

The international trainer developed a framework for the training of volunteers during the training of trainers, drawing on the input and geared towards the level of experience of the trainee-trainers. So, the trainers left the training of trainers with a programme and handouts ready for use in their training of the volunteers, and tailored to their own level of skills on the one hand and relevant for the local situation on the other hand.

14. *Not everyone can become a trainer.*

Even with careful selection, sound training and guidance, some people will still not achieve the skills required. Provisions for regular assessment of the performance of trainers needs to be build into the project and the trainers should be informed when recruited that they may be dismissed when not performing well.

3.4 Selection and training of volunteers

15. *Establish clear criteria for selecting volunteers and ensure process is monitored.*

In some areas, the selection criteria were not fully followed by participating CBOs and so some individuals selected as volunteers (or even as trainers) were not competent or sufficiently committed to become active as a human rights volunteer. This is understandable given the numerous other motivations for becoming part of such a project. The project management team monitoring this process addressed the problem by urging the CBOs to apply the criteria more closely.

Qualifications for human rights volunteers:

- *Volunteers should be active in a local organisation or group, such as a church or mosque, a community development organisation or a women's group, or exercise a profession such as teacher, legal advisor, health worker, social worker or agricultural extension worker;*
- *Preferably the volunteers have experience of community mobilisation;*

- *They should have good communication skills, in particular they should be good listeners;*
- *They should be living or working in a rural village or town and have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the local situation;*
- *They must have a good relationship with people inside and outside the community;*
- *They must embrace and be prepared to raise awareness of equal rights for all sectors of the community, including gender sensitivity;*
- *The leadership of the volunteer's organisation or group must agree to his/her human rights activities and be committed to the promotion of human rights.*

16. *Additional selection criteria to achieve geographical and organisational spread.*

Training several volunteers from one organisation increases the risk of failure if that one organisation fails to support the volunteers. A range of volunteers from a spread of different but inter-linked organisations proved most successful. A mix of volunteers from towns and villages was also successful. but inter-linked organisations proved most successful. A mix of volunteers from towns and villages was also successful.

17. *Interest and commitment is the key to success.*

The Project shows how a rural programme can function with local resources under difficult conditions, but only because of the interest and commitment of volunteers, trainers and project staff. One way to assess the interest and commitment of volunteers is by examining their track record in community mobilisation and campaigns during the selection process.

18. *A gender balance is possible and beneficial.*

One of the major successes of the Project is the inclusion and involvement of women. Approximately 45% of the volunteers and trainers are women. This was largely due to applying a quota system, which generated a heated debate. Some felt that human rights work was too risky for women. It has had a strong positive influence on the kinds of issues that volunteers work with at community level and also the way issues were tackled. The rights of women and children have come to prominence, including issues of domestic violence and the physical abuse of children and are now more broadly and easily discussed. It has also enhanced women's confidence to participate which was in evidence during the evaluation workshops and discussions.

3.5 Volunteers in action

19. *A flexible approach to the different activities volunteers may undertake.*

Although all volunteers receive the same training, they each bring different skills, experience and attitudes. They should be encouraged to undertake activities they are good at rather than forcing them to conform to an established pattern.

20. *The need for realistic, clear expectations.*

The volunteers will not be able to deal with all of the issues and problems in their communities. It is important to address this and establish clear and specific limits, if they are to avoid being inundated with demands and losing their sense of direction and achievement. Bearing in mind the extent of training and available support, the Project agreed the following specific roles for volunteers:

- Raising human rights awareness;
- Community mobilisation around rights issues;
- Monitoring and reporting violations.

21. *Political reality needs to be taken into account.*

The Project's initial idea was to train the volunteers to give legal advice to their communities. Given the formal judicial

system had all but collapsed and courts do not function, this was later seen as inappropriate. So, volunteers were trained to mobilise communities to act against injustice, with some basic legal training to enable them to advise communities when local authorities were abusing their power (for example, a local authority taking on both roles of judge and law enforcement).

Now that UN peacekeepers are deployed in the rural areas, fewer violations of civil and political rights are expected. As monitoring of economic, social and cultural rights is likely to become more important volunteers will get extra training on these.

As the displaced return to their communities, it is likely that other problems will arise, for instance, disputes of land or house ownership, often with an element of ethnic tension. Volunteers will need training on how to recognise patterns that could lead to conflict to alert others to intervene.

22. *The value of integrating drama.*

Drama was found to be a valuable tool for volunteers to raise awareness of rights in their communities. The Project worked with two drama directors who received information about methods used in other parts of Africa to develop the training and methodologies and provided theatre training to local drama groups.

It was intended that these groups would support the human rights volunteers in their work, but in fact the two worked rather separately, probably because the drama groups should have been trained in theatre as well as in human rights. In addition it would be useful if trainers and volunteers could also be trained to use drama, song and story telling in their activities, using local materials and resources.

23. *A network of human rights volunteers can be flexible and resilient to conflict.*

Despite disruption due to war, many of the volunteers continued to be active in some way – even after they were displaced. The fact they were already part of a CBO seemed to have been instrumental in sustaining their activities.

24. *Material aids and incentives for volunteers.*

Some basic campaigning materials such as posters, stickers and pamphlets would facilitate the volunteers' work. T-shirts with human rights slogans could be provided for volunteers to wear as a campaigning tool, but are also an incentive for them. They also need to be provided with stationery to perform their reporting tasks.

Most volunteers and their CBOs understood the voluntary nature of the Project and were comfortable with that. They initiated human rights activities in their organisations and communities without external resources. It must however

be recognised that the financial resources of local organisations and individuals in a country like Liberia are extremely limited and that therefore any activities that would imply costs, like travel or writing and sending reports, would not be undertaken.

The evaluation suggested a policy for recognising and rewarding volunteers who continue to be active, without providing cash payments. For example, materials to support their activities as mentioned above and regular visits and invitations to follow-up training or other meetings (see also lesson 26). Volunteers do receive a minimal financial contribution (US\$3/day) when participating in a training or meeting, to compensate the loss of any possible income.

25. *Need for openness concerning incentives.*

The Project responded to various requests for payment by generating an open discussion about the issue during meetings with volunteers and their parent CBOs. Together they explored how local resources could also be accessed to support the work of volunteers.

3.6 Support for volunteer activities

26. *The value of sustained follow-up to initial training.*

The aim of the Project was to integrate human rights into the activities of existing CBOs. It is too early to establish

whether this could be achieved by an initial training programme and some follow-up workshops. As the war interrupted the Project, it has not been possible to determine how far human rights activity would continue if no further support was given.

The evaluation concluded that the volunteers would increase their human rights activities if they had more support, in the form of visits by experienced human rights activists to provide technical assistance, share information and write up reports. It was also felt that visiting the parent CBOs and other supportive local organisations would help strengthen the local support structures for the volunteers.

The Project set up County Coordinating Committees (CCCs) to provide such support (see Section One, 2.2). They were intended to organise training and follow up workshops for the volunteers, which were funded, and to organise regular visits either by the trainers or CCC members themselves, which were not. After one and half year it was recognised that money was needed for visits too, but increased fighting and repression delayed its implementation. Payment to the CCC and their individual members will be dependent on a regular assessment of their performance.

Financial assistance for supporting the volunteer activities will be kept to a minimum in the hope of reducing dependency on donor assistance.

27. *The composition of the County Coordinating Committees – need for careful selection and support.*

A coordinating body, such as a CCC must comprise a wide range of local organisations to create a support basis. This implies that some of the organisations consulted will not have much knowledge or understanding of human rights. The project management team needs to take considerable time to inform the candidate-organisations about the Project and their role and discuss the importance of human rights, before accepting them as CCC member. To effectively coordinate the activities of trainers and volunteers, the members will need support, human rights training and regular meetings with the project management team.

28. *The challenge of varying expectations of CBOs.*

Some CBOs agreed their activists could participate in the human rights training on the basis of incorrect expectations. For example, some had not understood the real nature of human rights activities and others expected payment or other incentives. So, as with the CCC selection, CBOs required careful explanation of the Project and why human rights are important for the communities during the selection procedure. CCC members, trainers or even project management should have regular meetings with CBOs to discuss expectations, also after selection.

29. *Maintaining the network and volunteers' morale.*

It seems essential that regular visits from the national organisation responsible for the Project to CCCs and volunteer meetings is necessary as a recognition for the activities, to help solving problems and to create the feeling of being part of a network.

Whereas initially the Project Officer frequently attended meetings and other activities, increasingly other staff members of the NHRCL were involved in such visits and gradually member organisations will take over the monitoring role of the staff.

3.7 Project management

30. *Developing mutual respect.*

here has been a strong partnership relationship between the Coordinator of the SPA and the Project Officer, which is characterised by frank debate, as well as warmth and support. New plans and reports received in the Netherlands are thoroughly considered, and detailed comments sent in return. This has a motivating and supportive effect and often there is a heated exchange of views on how best to approach a new aspect of the programme. This has ensured the Project is well focused on its goal of remaining relevant to the rural population.

There has been a good exchange of expertise: the combination of on-the-ground knowledge and understanding of the situation in Liberia of the project staff and an outsider's view coupled with SPA's extensive human rights and project expertise had a positive effect on implementation and the success of the programme. From the outset, the SPA coordinator insisted that AI should not be considered as a donor but as a partner of the NHRCL, both having their human rights aims for Liberia. The SPA coordinator has remained in close contact through regular visits to Liberia to participate in planning and to learn the context and understand the challenges faced by the Project.

31. *Need for shared vision and commitment to human rights.*

The initial reluctance of the Monrovia-based human rights community to focus directly on the rural areas rather than building up their own capacity, was overcome thanks to the commitment of a few key individuals to the concept of working directly with CBOs. Their commitment to the fate of the rural population has been key to the direction in which the Project has been developed.

However, a project like this cannot succeed if it depends on some key individuals alone. For this Project this means that the NHRCL board must take full responsibility for the Project, although without getting involved in the details of implementation. Regular reporting of the project staff to the board should make that possible.

32. *The pros and cons of working in partnership with an umbrella organisation.*

It gave the Project a broader support base and the risks of financial problems, political pressure from government or allegations of political affiliation were diminished or at least dissipated.

On the other hand, member organisations have tended to compete to get their share of the Project and there is a chance they may interfere with the overall management or implementation out of self-interest, or lose interest if they are not directly involved.

The organisational interests need to be considered and balanced with the needs of the Project when working with a network.

33. *The value of operational support from a consultant.*

One legacy of years of conflict in Liberia was that most human rights activists lacked experience in developing and managing organisations and projects. This Project benefited from the direct and daily support of an experienced consultant from Ghana who helped them to develop strategies, design a project structure and set up an office from which the Project could be run. Aiming the Project directly at rural communities and overcoming the reluctance of Monrovia based human rights NGOs might have been much more difficult without his contribution.

34. *The need for on-going learning and feedback.*

It is mutually beneficial to all stakeholders if regular and frequent (say, quarterly) reports are prepared, read and acted upon. It is a form of on-going evaluation and can have a positive impact on planning and implementation of a project.

3.8 Networking and cooperating with other organisations

35. *The importance of analysing the human rights movement and civil society for a solid basis of the Project.*

Before choosing a partner, it is essential to undertake an in-depth analysis of the human rights movement and civil society more broadly. In all countries, there are committed and less committed human rights organisations. Some cannot be considered independent as they are too close to government or some other grouping, some may have been created purely with donor funding in mind. A selected partner will remain part of the broader human rights movement with all its dynamics, positive and negative, which may also affect the Project.

In Liberia, most human rights NGOs are urban based and not necessarily aware of the concerns of rural people nor committed to working in these areas. Intensive cooperation and a shared commitment between a national and an international NGO made this shift of emphasis possible.

It was equally important to assess the perception of the human rights community in broader civil society and make our own assessment of their role. To integrate human rights and community development it is essential that development and human rights organisations have an understanding of each other. Those involved in development may consider human rights activists too political and fear this could threaten their work.

36. *There is a keen interest in human rights within rural organisations and communities.*

Whereas development organisations at national level sometimes were reluctant to cooperate with human rights organisations because they were considered too political, community development organisations were interested to participate in the Project. This interest was largely due to communities defining their own burning issues rather than “importing” human rights concepts as something separate from community development.

The divide between human rights and development is gradually diminishing within a number of international and national organisations. This will hopefully create new possibilities for cooperation between human rights and development organisations aimed at protecting the full range of human rights.

37. *Participation of women in human rights organisations remains a challenge.*

While the level of participation of women at the County and community level in the Project was successful and encouraging, equal involvement of women in human rights organisations at national level is still far away, not only in Liberia but also in many other parts of the world. Men heavily dominate leadership and programme staff. On the other hand, women's organisations often focus solely on women's rights. Whereas entrenched values and attitudes (of both men and women) are difficult to change, encouraging them to work together is feasible and seemed to influence attitudes.

38. *Training needs to be focused.*

In the context of this Project, several training workshops were organised for human rights NGOs in Monrovia. The aim was to build their capacity to develop and manage the Project. The organisations chose a wide range of subjects, but it was only training on those topics directly related to the core aims of the Project which was effectively implemented.

3.9 Amnesty International's role

39. *An international NGO, namely AI, working with a national NGO and CBOs, can play a role in mobilising rural human rights activists.*

Obviously, other international NGOs, especially those working in development and with a large country presence, have been involved in similar activities. However, it seems that encouraging collective action against human rights violations is something quite new and this was certainly a new departure for AI.

Previously, for AI raising human rights awareness was solely the responsibility of AI national sections and groups within their own country, with some support from AI's International Secretariat. The Project in Liberia has demonstrated that an AI Section from another continent can have a facilitating role in raising human rights awareness and mobilising people for human rights elsewhere. The aim of strengthening the human rights movement in Liberia has proven effective and resilient to the difficult circumstances.

4. Conclusion

Communities in rural Liberia had not previously had the opportunity to take collective action against human rights violations. They had felt rather powerless, depending on Monrovia-based human rights organisations and lawyers to act on their behalf while the security forces have committed human rights violations with impunity. Rural citizens have welcomed the initiative of the Project to train them to identify and respond to human rights abuses and to promote equality, tolerance and respect for diversity using human rights values. It has provided a foundation and catalyst for the growth of the human rights movement in rural Liberia. One indication of its relevance is the fact that rural citizens, especially women, young people and children have become actively involved in advocating for their rights.

We hope that our learning from this Project will be of value to others.

Peter van der Horst

Coordinator SPA,
Amnesty International Dutch Section

Aloysius Toe

Liberia Pilot Project Officer
National Human Rights
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November 2004

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

Chronology of the Project implementation

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| Sep 1998 | Field visit by SPA Coordinator for needs assessment and other consultations. |
| Jul 1999 | Consultation with human rights community in Monrovia on draft project outline |
| Sep 1999 | Training workshop for human rights NGOs on developing a strategy for human rights work in rural areas. |
| Nov 1999 | Project outline completed and agreed |
| Late 1999 | Planning workshop, joint action plan drawn up and Memorandum of Understanding between NHRCL and AI Dutch Section signed. |

Project delayed during first half of 2000 due to absence of SPA coordinator and the consultant.

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| May 2000 | Assessment of the level of human rights awareness in Bong and Nimba Counties. |
| Mid 2000 | Human rights training workshop for national human rights and other NGOs, sponsored by AI USA Section. |

Oct 2000	Aloysius Toe was appointed Project Officer.
Oct 2000	Consultation meeting with the broader human rights community in Monrovia to feedback research in Bong and Nimba and discuss the proposal to focus on building a rural network rather than supporting human rights NGOs in Monrovia.
End of 2000	Visits made to the three target Counties for assessment purposes and consultation with potential community based collaborators.
Jan-Feb 2001	Training of Trainers four-week course over six week period for 15 trainers – 14 successfully completed the course.
Mar 2001	Project Officer and consultant travel to Nimba, Bong and Bomi Counties to discuss the selection of volunteers with trainers and CCC members.
Apr-May 2001	First volunteers selected and trained
May 2001	Two drama directors conduct a one-week assessment in Bong and Bomi Counties leading to preparation of a concept document.
Jun 2001	A three-week training course for drama groups held in Bong and Bomi Counties.
Jun 2001	A five-day refresher course held in Gbarnga for trainers.
Oct 2001	Meeting of the Project Advisory Committee (PAC).
Sep-Oct 2001	Second group of volunteers selected.
Oct-Nov 2001	Training for second group of volunteers.
Feb 2002	Mid-term evaluation.

Apr-Jul 2002	Third volunteer training.
May 2002	A further two drama groups trained.
Jun 2002	SPA coordinator's visit to Liberia relocated to Guinea and second meeting of Project Advisory Committee cancelled for security reasons.
Late 2002	Majority of volunteers and trainers fled their Communities due to intense fighting.
Aug 2002	Consultant leaves Liberia.
Late 2002	Follow up workshops held with volunteers from first three groups.
Sep 2002	Two drama group directors attend training in Sierra Leone on Forum Theatre methodology.
Nov 2002	Project Officer jailed on false charges of treason.
Jan 2003	James Saybay appointed as interim Project Officer.
Jun 2003	Intense fighting in and around Monrovia. Project Officer escapes to Ghana.
Aug 2003	Accra Peace Agreement leads to cessation of hostilities.
Oct 2003	Project Officer resumes work with Project.
Nov 2003	Selected national human rights NGOs trained in monitoring and documenting human rights violations.
Dec 2003	Meeting with volunteers and trainers from Bomi to discuss next steps after the war.
Jan 2004	SPA Coordinator travels to Monrovia to assess the post conflict situation and to plan how to re-establish the Project, in particular, the network of human rights volunteers.

APPENDIX 2

Summary outline of training of trainers programme

At the end of each day the programme would be reviewed with a view to what was relevant for training of volunteers. The results of those reviews were used as the elements for the training programme for volunteers that was created in the course of the 6-week training of trainers.

Week 1

- what are human rights
- human rights in Liberia
- dual legal systems of statutory and traditional law
- listening skills
- International human rights and rights in Liberia
- claiming rights
- conflict resolution
- training techniques

Week 2

- developing a project (theory and practice)
- story telling
- field trip

Week 3 and 4

practicing new skills in the own community

Week 5

- para-legal work: role and principles
- networking/contact building
- group dynamics
- monitoring, fact-finding documenting human rights violations
- principles of research
- interviewing skills
- family relations (rights of women and children, inheritance rights etc)
- treatment of prisoners

Week 6

- economic and environmental rights
- taking action
- finalising volunteer training programme
- what can go wrong

Requests for a full outline of the training programme, handouts and a reflection of the international trainer can be sent to:
p.vanderhorst@amnesty.nl

APPENDIX 3

Summary outline of 6-day volunteers training programme

- role and skills of human rights volunteers
- listening skills
- human rights: burning issues in the community
- skills and experience of participants
- burning issues and rights in the Liberian constitution
- root causes
- human rights are for everyone in the world
- how to respond to burning issues
- project planning
- human rights in Liberian law
- criminal and civil justice and customary law
- claiming rights
- ways to raise human rights awareness
- gender sensitivity
- basic legal advice on family relations, rights of prisoners,
- contact building
- * monitoring, fact-finding and reporting human rights abuses
- basic conflict resolution and mediation

Requests for a full outline of the volunteers training programme and handouts can be sent to: p.vanderhorst@amnesty.nl

APPENDIX 4

Review of training needs of volunteers

(listed by volunteers and trainers in a workshop with the evaluation team).

Understanding human rights

What are human rights, difference between human rights abuses and crimes?

Your rights in the constitution.

International and regional instruments for civil, political, social economic and cultural rights.

Strategies to protect the above, lobbying and advocacy work.

Monitoring and reporting human rights abuses

Monitoring and fact-finding.

Conducting an interview, listening and counselling skills.

Key principles.

Writing a report (report format).

Strategies for raising awareness of human rights

Listening survey.

Strategies for raising awareness at a community level.

Using drama, song, storytelling.

Participatory training skills based on adult learning and experiential learning.

Community mobilisation skills

Participatory Rural Appraisal skills.

Community entry approaches.

Community mobilisation strategies.

Contact building and networking.

How to motivate the community to appreciate human rights volunteers and their work.

Accessing community resources.

Paralegal skills

Criminal procedure, your rights and the police.

Court structure and procedure.

Traditional law and justice systems.

Peacebuilding skills

Conflict analysis.

Negotiation, mediation and reconciliation.

Strategies for promoting peace through human rights work.

