HUMANITY UNITED   TRUSTAFRICA

**Report of the Second Convening
on Strengthening Civil Society in Liberia**

October 6–7, 2009
Provident Hotel
Monrovia, Liberia

Overview

The second convening of the Liberia Civil Society Initiative, held October 6–7 in Monrovia, gathered representatives from Humanity United, TrustAfrica and several grantee organizations. The first day was dedicated to discussions relating to the three programmatic areas: community empowerment, governance monitoring and the development of the independent media. The second day featured a training session on project outcome development and impact assessment, with program officers of grantee organizations in attendance. Both days served as learning opportunities for both donors and grantees. The NGOs' perspectives on the thematic areas help us further our understanding of the political and social environment of the program. And as we share our views, partners are able to acquire skills they have not fully grasped before.

The convening sought to achieve two main objectives: (1) improve the Civil Society Initiative's approach to capacity development through feedback from partner organizations and (2) create a space of mutual learning where best practices are highlighted and lessons shared. The convening also offered a way to learn about individual progress and will serve in the future as a periodic feedback for Humanity United and TrustAfrica. Emphasis was placed on the need for regular dialogue so that adjustments can be made where needed.

It should be noted that this convening took place just as the first three grants were winding up and as the second round of grants were gaining pace in their implementation. This meant that more insights were provided and the discussions were more elaborated. Partner groups were organized along thematic lines and invited to make joint presentations with specific guidelines leaving room for creativity.

Day 1

Topics Discussed

1. **Major governance issues in Liberia and best ways to address them: a civil society perspective:**

Panelists:	Aloysius Toe	Thomas Doe Nah	Gorge W. William
	FOHRD	**CENTAL**	**LWD**

George Williams, Executive Director of Liberia Democracy Watch, delivered the main presentation on governance issues. Joining him were Thomas Doe Nah and Aloysius Toe.

In his PowerPoint presentation, Williams outlined two main governance issues in Liberia. The first is related to structures in place and their responsiveness when it comes to reconstituting governance in the post-conflict era. The second issue is the political will that is expected from the government, especially the Executive and the Legislature.

Elaborating on the first issue, Williams raised the following points:

- **The role of the Governance Commission**: This commission was created to take a critical look at governance arrangements in the country and proposed adequate reforms. Overall, however, its performance has not met expectations.
- **The struggling Civil Service Reform Program:** The fledgling reforms worked well with some ministries and autonomous agencies, especially those that embraced concepts like "right-sizing" instead of "down-sizing."
- **The Anti-Corruption Commission and the fight against corruption:** Fighting corruption by a commission is seriously questioned, and some experts ask why not strengthen the weak judicial system instead of creating a commission.
- **The National Legislature and its public posture:** Legislators seem to have forgotten about their role, and instead concentrate mainly on their benefits and entitlements.
- **Poorly coordinated public policy programs in the country:** Williams noted an absence of proper coordination, cohesion and ownership in all government-initiated programs.

The second issue, political will, is by far the more challenging one. There is a lack of political will to take practical steps to curb the excesses of political players, especially those connected to the ruling party. There is no concrete national strategy to review the reform process to ensure responsiveness and national identity.

The best approaches to addressing the governance issues, Williams said, include:

- Having civil society organizations (CSOs) intervene in the governance reform process not merely as watchdogs but as true partners, from the inception to the implementation of reforms;
- Developing CSO capacity to address national problems in a strategic way and to monitor public policy programs;
- Providing alternative processes to assist in informing National decision-policy making;

- Monitoring public policy implementation and provide feedback to national leaders and other stakeholders;
- Strengthening the relevance and image of CSOs in national decision-making.

The second speaker, Thomas Doe Nah of CENTAL, elaborated on the following governance issues in Liberia:

- Weak public understanding, perception, and interest in issues of corruption
- Poverty and the benefits of corruption
- The lack of an effective mechanism for deterring corrupt practices
- Weak commitment from policy and decision makers
- Weak institutional capacity and sustainability among organizations fighting corruption, including CENTAL
- Limited access to information
- Limited community feedback
- Insufficient number of committed volunteers at the community level
- Inaccessibility of many communities
- Finding change agents and entry points

He went on to describe CENTAL's efforts to address major governance challenges in fighting corruption. These efforts include:

- Establishing the Advocacy and Legal Advice Center, a haven for whistleblowers, which enables victims of corruption to report and get advice
- Promoting the national anti-corruption program in eight counties
- Poverty and Corruption in Africa (PCA), which empowers the poor to speak out about the impact of corruption on their lives and enables them to proffer ideas and participate in community/government actions for reforms
- Right to Know, a project aimed at broadening citizens' knowledge and participation in governance
- Establishing integrity clubs, or I-Clubs, in counties across Liberia

The third speaker, Aloysius Toe of FOHRD, expressed his agreement with the points highlighted by the previous speakers. He highlighted a few FOHRD interventions, such as training communities in budget literacy and the monitoring of public expenditures in Bomi and Grand Bassa Counties. Toe also informed the session that during some of FOHRD's training workshops, government officials have unexpectedly turned up and even pledged support by providing information on budget and county development efforts. He observed that the major challenge to the budget monitoring work is the lack of information.

2. **Challenges in media development and lessons learned from past and current projects:**

Panelists:	Lawrence Randall	Peter Quaqua	Emmanuel Johnson
	LMC	**PUL**	**ALICOR**

This panel, which discussed the challenges of the media sector, was composed of Lawrence Randall, Executive Director of the Liberia Media Center, Peter Quaqua, President of the Press Union of Liberia, and Emmanuel Johnson, Secretary General of the Association of Liberia Community radios (ALICOR).

They highlighted the following challenges:

i. **Lack of qualified journalists:** Panelists said the lack of qualified journalists has compounded a series of problems with media development. However, they added that lately more journalists have benefited from various training programs.

ii. **Low wages:** The panel emphasized that media houses pay journalists very poorly, and as result qualified and competitive journalists leave the profession for new vocations. This situation could persist as long the profession lacks attractive incentives or salaries.

iii. **Enforcing the code of ethics:** Due to the poor economic situation and the low wages, journalists tend to "sell" their reportage in order to make ends meet. Many people and businesses pay journalists to get press coverage, both in print and on radio.

iv. **Individual owned media outlets:** Most media outlets in Liberia are owned, operated and managed by individuals who are not necessarily journalists and who lack basic management skills and technical know-how. They go into the radio or newspaper business to make a profit and seldom care about the plight of journalists or their professional development. These individual owners tend to make all the decisions and always go unchallenged, for they can decide who to hire and fire regardless of their competencies.

v. **Affirming the independence of community radios vis-à-vis government:** Many community radio stations in Liberia have suffered from the interference of county officials, who regard community radio as "property of the government," try to appoint their friends to run the stations, and sometimes go as far as closing down stations or refusing to pay for government announcements. ALICOR has been working to address such situations, but it is still a challenge for there is no clear national policy on community radio stations.

The panel said there are 42 mini-equipped radio stations in the country. Most of them have gradually moved away from the old-fashioned analogue systems and now broadcast with digital equipment. With ongoing training from LMC and others, a good number of journalists now possess significant knowledge and are conversant in professional ethics. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) is more active than ever before in regulatory issues, partnerships with civil society institutions, international organizations and close consultation with the government.

3. **Best practices and challenges in community empowerment:**

Panelists:	James Yarsiah	Marietta Williams	Eddie Jarwolo	Roosevelt Woods
	RRF	**UMWAEO**	**NAYMOTE**	**FIND**

The panelists focused on three areas: **Description of Best Practices**, **Challenges** and **Conclusions**.

The best practices in community empowerment, based on panelists' experiences, include:

- Involving local people at various levels of program activities, including planning, implementation, monitoring & evaluation;
- Using project forums as an opportunity for interaction between the citizenry and local officials;
- Emphasizing adequate community mobilization and sensitization, which can lead to achievements not easily realized by other actors;
- Creating better rapport with communities we enter as external agents, which leads to better impact;
- Engaging in participatory decision-making, which gives community residents an opportunity to speak up and a willingness to learn;
- Working to facilitate processes, with local people identifying problems and solutions;
- Enabling community residents to take responsibility for their own development;
- Hiring local community members as project staff as much as possible, because they understand the local setting and can support community involvement and participation;
- Training locally appointed community volunteers and focal persons, who return to their communities and prove valuable in getting residents to participate;
- Working with existing local CBOs, rather than creating new ones, so that community volunteers can reach many people in a short period of time.

Challenges/Constraints

- **Dependency syndrome in communities:**
  This is a challenge of post-conflict Liberia, where communities have taken comfort in relief assistance and tend to expect "others to do it for them." Working with communities to discover or rediscover their talents and capabilities remains a daunting task.
- **Political and culture influence:**
  Local officials in some areas are organizing or sponsoring youth groups and CBOs to work for their political goals; some use the traditional, cultural system of authority to make decisions on development, excluding certain segments of the communities.
- **Lack of access to information:**
  This is a major challenge in all the project areas; it deprives people of the power to make informed decisions that can positively impact their lives. The lack of information is most critical in the areas of rule of law, civil rights and the justice system;
- **Inefficiency of District Development Committees:**
  DDCs set up by the government and UNDP but lack basic tools, equipment and other incentives to perform; they are non-functional in many areas and pose an obstacle to NGOs' efforts to organize communities.

Community participation enhances people's political awareness as they learn to voice their concerns, play an active part in making decisions that affect their lives and contribute to peace- and nation-building.

Community empowerment projects are currently implemented by the four local partners in 10 counties and reach some 120 communities.

4. **Lunchtime talk: NGO sustainability in the Liberian context:**

Presenter: Oscar Bloh
Search for Common Ground

At this lunchtime discussion, Oscar Bloh, Country Director of Search for Common Ground, led a conversation about NGO sustainability. The presenter got the audience to brainstorm and come up with a working definition of sustainability.

Bloh characterized sustainability as an aspiration, a journey with a destination. Sustainability, according to him, stems from the following:

*   Funding security
*   Viability
*   Program effectiveness
*   Impact
*   Focus

As the session progressed, participants also highlighted factors that influence sustainability. They concluded that funding security for an NGO entails:

*   Spreading dependency among several donors by securing multiple sources of funding
*   Acquiring and maintaining a qualified staff
*   Developing the ability to organize fundraising activities
*   Engaging in strategic planning
*   Income structure sustenance

Viable institution posses these qualities:

*   Use Indicators
*   Provide good incentives
*   Are organized according to the laws and regulations in force
*   Are legitimate. or in other words build its own "constituency"
*   Are demand-driven
*   Have a good internal governance structure

Program effectiveness requires the ability to design programs that are responsive to communities' needs and be able to deliver on them. Effective organizations should always strive for maximum impact, implement activities that can be measured, and demonstrate the impact sought. Finally, in order to be sustainable, an organization must focus on specific programmatic areas where it can develop some level of expertise. The organization should not be involved in every type of activity for the sake of taking advantage of funding opportunities.

As the first day concluded, following an hour-long lunchtime dialogue, Ed Marcum was invited to make concluding remarks. He used the opportunity to thank the previous speaker, thank and encourage partners in their development efforts, and challenge them to strive for excellence and double the development efforts of their various organizations.

Agenda for Day 1

Convening objectives:

- Improve the Liberia Civil Society Initiative's approach to capacity development through feedback from partner organizations.
- Create a space of mutual learning among partner organizations, a space where best practices are highlighted and lessons learned are shared.

Time	Activities
8:30–9:00	Arrival of participants
9:00–9:05	Welcome remarks, meeting objectives, setting the stage for the day
9:05–9:15	Introduction of participants
9:15–9:45	*Major governance issues in Liberia and the best ways to address them: A civil society perspective: FOHRD, LDW, CENTAL*
9:45–10:00	Discussion
10:00–10:15	BREAK
10:15–10:45	Challenges in media development and lessons learned from past and current projects: LMC, PUL, ALICOR
10:45–11:15	Discussion
11:15–11:45	Best practices and challenges in community empowerment: RRF, UMWAEO, NAYMOTE, FIND
11:45–12:15	Discussion
12:15–13:00	Update on Civil Society Index research by AGENDA
13:00–14:00	Lunchtime Talk: NGO Sustainability Main speaker: Oscar Bloh, Director, Search for Common Ground-Liberia

List of Participants for Day 1

No	Name	Organization	Email Contact
1	David D. Johnson	FIND	Daly24@yahoo.com
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13	Tom Crick	Carter Center	tcrick@emory.edu
14	Lori Bishop	Humanity United	
15	J. Aloysius Toe	FOHRD	aloysiustoe@yahoo.com
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21	Peter Quaqua	PUL	pqua31@yahoo.com
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24	Robert W. Williams	LDW	rwww75@yahoo.com

DAY 2

Topics Discussed

The convening's second day featured a training session on project outcome development and impact assessment. It was the second training of its kind, following one held on August 22. The session brought together project officers of the nine grantee organizations, who participated in the first training program. The training session was co-facilitated by Horacio Trujillo and Meredith Blair. Its objective was to help partners become familiar with the civic participation Excel sheet and ensure outcome plans are developed.

After welcoming participants, Horacio reviewed the agenda and the goals of the session. He emphasized that Humanity United and TrustAfrica were interested in monitoring the work of various organizations to help them meet standards in project implementation and properly measure progress and outcomes. The training, which was very participatory in nature, enabled the review of partners' experience with the questionnaires provided to them in August. Through this review, participants narrated their difficulties and experience in using the tools. They were then introduced to the Excel spreadsheet for data input and organized to carry out some practice in groups.

Topics and areas covered during the session included:

- Outcomes planning – why we do it?
- Developing outcomes statements – what's a S.M.A.R.T outcome?
- Reviewing outcomes planning document
- Practical exercise of organizations outcomes plans
- Group discussion about draft outcomes and data collection
- Review of aggregated civic participation data
- Training assessment and next steps

The session ended with group activities and feedback from participants on their level of comfort in using the different tools. Humanity United followed up by sending each participant a set of tools to help them to better monitor their project interventions and evaluate the impacts. The tools shared with partners include:

- Tips in writing outcome statement
- A handbook of data collection tool
- Planning assessment and learning guidelines
- Citizens participation in governance survey tool
- Excel sheet of data collection tool
- A handout on Indicators formulation

Agenda of the Training Session

Objective: TrustAfrica partners become familiar with the civic participation Excel documents and have draft outcome plans developed.

Time	Activity
9:00–9:20	Welcome, review of agenda, and goal setting
9:20–9:45	Review experiences with questionnaires
9:45–10:30	Working session: How to use the Excel document and input data
10:30–10:45	BREAK
10:45–11:15	Outcomes planning — Why we do it?
11:15–11:45	Developing outcomes statements — What's a S.M.A.R.T. Outcome?
11:45–12:00	Review outcomes planning document
12:00–12:45	LUNCH
12:45–1:45	Working session: Assisted development of organizational outcomes plans
1:45–2:00	Group discussion about draft outcomes and data collection
2:00–2:15	Review of aggregated civic participation data
2:15–3:00	Questions, training assessment and next steps

List of Participants at the Training Session

No	Name	Organization	Email
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