Transformation, empowerment and Sustainability in Liberia

Background of the war:

Liberia is, perhaps, one of the most severely war-affected nations in Africa. Fourteen years of civil conflict have left a devastated, war-ravaged society, struggling to recover from destruction, suffering, pain and death. The war depopulated the rural areas, severely disrupted traditional social systems and structures and completely shattered state institutions. Over 250,000 persons were killed, approximately 500,000 displaced internally, and about 800,000 sought refuge in neighbouring countries at the height of the war. There are a variety of factors that underlie the collapse of the Liberian state, but none are more significant than decades of corruption, combined with massive historical disparities between a privileged elite and an impoverished population.

The vast majority of Liberian affected by the war are the youths, a large number of whom now feel alienated, frustrated and vulnerable. They were witnesses to the gruesome murder of their mothers and fathers and/or other loved ones. In some cases youths were the principal perpetrators of these heinous crimes themselves. Changing their mind-set is therefore most urgent.

With life expectancy rapidly declining to as low as 45 years of age due to factors including the spread of HIV/AIDS, those aged between 15 and 24 years are now a dominant group in society. Liberia’s youths are most affected by change and also have the potential to be the most powerful agents of change. As such, they could either sustain peace or generate further instability in the country.

Background of Camp for peace:

Camp for Peace Liberia (CFP-Liberia) is a non-profit organisation working with young people to promote sustainable peace and development. It was established in 2005 by its founder, B. Abel Learwellie and other child soldiers while pursuing degrees at the University of Liberia. It mainly works in the regions of Montserrado, Margibi, Bong and Lofa. It is a fully registered non-for-profit NGO –Government of Liberia registration number “MPEA/NGO/AC#1036.

From their experiences as former abductees and orphans – many of whom lost immediate and extended family members, friends and neighbours and suffered displacement – led them to commit to the ongoing and unmet needs of former child
soldiers and ex-combatants as well as other youths that were equally affected by the war.

At CFP-Liberia, we have formally prepared ourselves as educators, human rights activists, medical officers, administrators, environmentalists, and in other professional fields through university education and work experience. This enabled us to organize this organization to cater to those affected by the crisis.

CFP – Liberia works to rehabilitate, reintegrate and empower those impacted by conflict and HIV/AIDS in Liberia. CFP-Liberia has been doing this through livelihood support programs, camping program, education, vocational training, peace building, and health, agriculture and human rights activities.

CFP-Liberia believes that former child soldiers can work themselves out of poverty with dignity if they are not treated as an object but as a subject. Therefore we use multiplicity strategies to combat unemployment by addressing the challenges and reality of life faced by former child soldiers since we know that children born in these situations are not their own making but caught up in the situation.

Our Vision

To create an environment where youths can express themselves, participate in the process of peace building, development, conflict resolution and direct their energies and passion for social change to build a better future.

Our Mission

To contribute to the empowerment, rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers, orphans, abductees, child mothers and vulnerable women heading households through education, peace building, human rights, livelihood support and HIV/AIDS programs.

Our Core Values

- Hard work & commitment
- Transparency and accountability
- Protection and promotion of human rights and democracy
- Gender sensitivity
- Partnership and collaboration

Our Goal

Our goal is to ensure that young people can transform their ongoing challenges to become considerable assets to their communities through self-sustainment, development and empowerment programs.
Our Strategic Objectives

- To reduce or eliminate violence in communities through academic and community-based physical and sports endeavors that can promote community healing.
- To instill a sense of proactive self-reliance among young people.
- To help vulnerable youth to attain knowledge and specialized skills that leads to jobs.
- To create employment opportunities for young people.
- To conserve and protect the environment.
- To curb illiteracy and promote higher education among young people.
- To bring young people together in both spiritual and physical awareness through outdoor activities.
- To help women and girls in the community, especially the destitute, to meet social needs.

CFP-Liberia runs the following programs

- **War Affected Youth Rehabilitation Program** to reintegrate former child soldiers and ex-combatants who suffer from exclusion and marginalisation in their communities.

  Presenting equipment to graduates for reintegration

  Former girl soldiers learning how to fix hair
Psychosocial activities

Young graduates engaging their community with their new skills
Former girl soldiers doing tailoring and sewing at the vocational school

- **Active Non-violence and Peace Education Program** to promote the culture of peace and non-violence in schools and communities, training young people as peer mediators and teachers as counsellors.
Promoting culture of peace in various schools

- **Education Investment Program for Street children and vulnerable youth** to improve access to education, offer psychological support and protect street children from sexual exploitation, child labour and HIV/AIDS.

- **Empowering youth through micro-finance** with a special support for young girls who risk to be recruited in the prostitution market. The financial services offered enable young people to realise their potential and to lift themselves out of poverty.

- **HIV/AIDS Education and Awareness Program** to raise awareness, provide information, offer counselling and reduce the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases.
- **Peace Camp Program** where young people of all ages gather to attend workshops and seminars on peacebuilding and resolution of conflicts.

  ![Peace Camp Image]

**Camp activities**

- **Human Rights, Democracy and Governance Program** to empower young people and encourage them to become active citizens.
THIS IS THE ROAD LEADING TO NORTHERN LIBERIA – WE RISK THE TILES OF REACHING THERE EVERY MONTH

“The condition of these former child soldiers in Northern Liberia is desperate that even the most basic help will bring solace and hope”.

UPDATE ON CURRENT ACTIVITIES

In April, 18 former child soldiers and ex-combatants who graduated from the vocational rehabilitation center under our sponsorship were provided tools and equipment including a minimum startup funding to enable them explore their talents and establish their own enterprises. The startup funds were given in the form of a micro loan scheme that will be paid back for future sustainability.
A scheduled monitoring and evaluation plan were also put into place to monitor the impacts of the skills and knowledge acquired by them. Most of them are positively engaged in their various disciplines and some have established their own agriculture farms as a result of the training acquired. They hope, never to return to violence and war any more.

Also in April, 35 new group of youth including former child soldiers, ex-combatants and other war affected were recruited, provided with psychological orientation and sent to the Lutheran Vocational Institute for nine months of training. While at the school, they will receive psychosocial support during the nine months of training. They will also undergo nine months of training in various disciplines such as agriculture, auto mechanic, carpentry, electricity and plumbing. Constant follow-up and monitoring will be carried out in making sure that the students remain on their campuses during the time of the training.

Four workshops in conflict resolution, peer mediation and support, trauma management, good human rights practices and effective communication were held for 120 youths both in and out of school. At these workshops, practical life experiences were shared by participants as a means of giving each other moral support.
THE STORY OF B. ABEL LEARWELLIE
SURVIVING THE TRAUMA OF WAR IN LIBERIA

I am B. Abel Learwellie from Liberia. I was born on May 16, 1974 in Salala, Lower Bong County.

I begin a man at the age of sixteen years when I was recruited as a child soldier against my way in 1990 during the Liberian civil war.

We finally felt prey to the reality of rumors on April 14, 1990 when influx of soldiers from the national capital Monrovia pull to the battle front in eastern Liberia. Hurriedly, my Mon collected us from school and told us to pack our bags and leave from Gbarnga because the rebels were enorging on the town. Everyone was running hatter scatter in all directions and we headed for Lofa where our parents originated. In route to Lofa on that day, we took with us half bag of rice (our stable food) and few personal effects. We were stopped at a military checkpoint for inspection and our food and clothing were taken from us. This was the beginning of my trauma and I knew that we were heading for hell. Sadly, we left the checkpoint and continue our journey to Lofa. We arrived to our final designation (Yarpueh) to be precise the following day. The sad story was that we had no food left to eat and we had to go in the bush to look for bush yam and other bush food for our survivor. This really pin me down and I felt that the entire world was coming to an end.

We got adjusted to the situation after few weeks of stay in our home until June 1990 when we saw a group of guys who called themselves intelligence of the rebel group and told our Dad that the rebel would enter any time, so they warm our Dad to leave the village and go to exile along with his children. Our Mon and Dad decided to leave the next day and encouraged us to go along with them into Guinea. But my sisters and brothers felt that the war wasn’t for young people and children and so they told my parents that they wanted to stay in the village and I decided to stay with them.

While sitting outside of our thatch house one afternoon in July 1990, we heard sound “ca-ta-ca, ca-ta-ca, ca-ta-ta, kpa,kpa,kpa”, everywhere was gun firing around the village and the rebels finally entered the village. We want human blood! Who are you! Who is a soldier here! We will kill everyone! Where is the Kru people! Where is the Mandigoe man! These are some of the words the rebels were saying! During the war, two major tribes were the main enemies of the Charles Taylor Rebel Movement. The Krus were kinsmen of former military junta leader, Samuel K. Doe and the Mandigos were accused by the rebels of linking sensitive information about the movement to the military janta. This was my very first time to see rebel with gun and human blood on their clothes. They asked all young men in the village to assemble outside. We all gathered and formed a formation and immediately we were given guns to keep guard. They asked us to take off our clothes and shoes and tie on red cloths around our waist and heads. I was sixteen years and I had no idea on how to shoot gun neither to smoke nor drink liquor.
In less than an hour we heard a huge gun fired and someone was killed. We were told to go and take the dead body and have it thrown away but what I saw was that it was my sister husband who has been killed. My trouble grew bigger and bigger from hunger to witnessing my relative being killed. I got very angry and said in my inner voice that I was going to kill one of the guys in ravage of the death of my brother in law. From that moment, my life took a negative position and I began to smoke marijuana, inhale cocaine and gun powder, drink plenty of alcohol and begin very drugs arctic and alcoholic at the age of 16. These things made me brave and aggressive but one thing I did not do was to kill someone.

In February 1991, some young women were arrested and we were told to rape these women and I refused on the ground that they were my sisters. Because of that, I was threatened by my commander that I would be killed if I don’t comply by the order. Then my friends were order to tie me and they gave me a duck tiebay. My two hands and feet tie behind me and my face up in the air. I spent two days in the rope. Upon release, I was paralyzed for two months.

In October 1992, a renew fighting broke up between my rebel group, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO). ULIMO was predominantly Muslim militia. We were sent to the battle front to push back the enemies from getting to Gbarnag. Gbarnag was the headquarters of NPFL and we were cut off in an armed bush for three days. On the third day, we managed to escape but wouldn’t go back to our commander because of fear of being killed. We were five in number and we remain in the bush for nine months barely surviving on fruits. We had a fear that when our commanders see us they will kill us and when the enemies see us they will kill us. One day I told my friends that we should try and go back to the village and maybe we would see people that we know. Fortunately for us, we met some of our aunts and sisters who were also in hiding in the forest. They first saw us like animals that were changing into human beings and we put them under gun point and told them not to move. Finally we realized that they were our aunts and sisters. After a month later we all were captured by another rebel group who accused us as enemies. A guy pointed at me and said you are a soldier and I said no to him. They beat us and scrip our sisters and aunts and raped them before our very presence. One of my cousins felt the worst ever in his life and he committed suicide by hanging himself. This is one of the tragedies that I will never forget in my life. My sisters beg for mercy and they were allowed to cross the border to Guinea and we were re-recruited and forced to go along with them.

At the beginning of 1994, I finally escape to Guinea to rejoin my family. In Guinea I became a student at the Refugee school but would not comprehend with the huge memory of killing and drugging. Many days it was like seeing ghost crying in my sleep and I was like going mad. One day I said to myself, no more turning back, enough is enough. I eventually recover by reading the Bible and praying to my God for deliverance. Days of schooling in Refugees Camp were like living in hell because there was no food and soap to bath many days. But through it all I may it and completed high school in 1995. Upon my graduation from high school, I enrolled at the Refugee Vocational School and earned a certificate in Basic Typing and Small Business Management. At this moment I felt that the war was over because we heard on the radio that all the warlords have formed a government of national unity in Monrovia and there was no more war. So I rejoined my parents and we decided to go
back home from exile the beginning of 1997. Upon our arrival in Liberia, to our surprise, we were arrested by group of armed ULIMO men and they considered us as enemies. This was a massacre! More than 200 persons were killed in my village by these men. The killing was done on a daily routine, every morning; they selected ten to twenty persons to be slaughtered in the middle of the town. This I knew that if we don’t escape, we would be selected one morning to be killed. So we decided to leave the village to move to Gbarnga, the headquarters of former rebel leader Charles Taylor. On our way that afternoon, we were again arrested and my Dad was beaten and shot in his chest by one of the soldiers. This is another memory that I will never forget in my life. After the death of my father, we continue our journey to Gbarnga and I finally migrated to Monrovia in late 1997 with the vision to go to University. I enrolled at the University of Liberia in 1999 and graduated in 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree (BA) in Sociology.

When I first came to Monrovia, I felt I wasn’t a normal person anymore and I thought of going back to the battle front to revenge on those who kill my Dad and raped my sisters and cause my cousin to kill himself. Up to present I am troubled some days when I think of these stories.

In it all I am grateful to God first and to the Lutheran Church in Liberia whose prayer and guidance kept me strong. They are the stance of my transformation. I started being transformed in 1997 when I first attended the Lutheran Trauma Healing workshop and I decided never to go back to fighting. This is how I came to the field to serve as a role model and become an instrument of change for the many thousands youth and children whose lives were shattered by the civil war just like me. I started up as a volunteer encouraging young people who were living in the ghettos and the streets with my story of survivor. As a result of my story, many young people dropped their guns and refused to go back to war.

This campaign also risked my life during Liberia second civil war that started in 1999 – 2003. Many days I was threaten by friends who knew me. I wasn’t worry because I knew I was doing the right thing. God gave me the strength to continue my campaign of non-violence until the United Nations disarmed all child soldiers and combatants in Liberia.

One night while in my beg I got a vision that I should direct my career to helping young people who youthful lives have been corrupted and who have been used as instruments of war against their will to recover from nightmare and trauma and be transformed more positively. Right after the disarmament process, my energies were manifested into organizing Camp for Peace Liberia.

The corn of my counseling to young people and hopeless children is that if I can overcome all the horrors I went through, you can also overcome your own trauma if you remain focused and willing to be transformed and that you are not alone.