

Documenting the Resilience of Liberians in the Face of Threats to Peace

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The people of Liberia have suffered greatly since this disease took hold. But we are a strong and resilient people. As their President, I will not rest until we defeat Ebola. To Liberians my message is simple- we are fighting back”- President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

The Framework for Assessing Resilience (FAR) is a cross-country project aimed at understanding the sources of resilience in society that can be leveraged for building peace. FAR seeks to shift the conversation from one of fragility to one that looks at both existing as well potential assets and strengths within societies and institutions that enable people to recover from, overcome, and prevent violent conflict. The project is coordinated by Interpeace; a Geneva-based international peacebuilding organization that has worked in Liberia since 2008 and has a presence in 22 countries worldwide. The FAR study is being piloted in Timor-Leste, Guatemala and Liberia. In Liberia, the Platform for Dialogue and Peace (P4DP), is implementing the national level research as a local partner of Interpeace, which consists of a first consultation phase that was implemented between June 2014 and February 2015, and a second phase of action research through a national working group which will begin in June 2015. This research was designed with the dual objective of making the voices of Liberians audible and central to the definition of resilience in Liberia, and to engage policy makers— at both national and international levels —on the development of assessment frameworks for resilience as it specifically relates to peacebuilding. Prior to the outbreak of the Ebola epidemic in March-2014, Liberians celebrated 10 years of peace. However, the current peace, made possible through the collective efforts of Liberians but heavily reliant on support from regional and international stakeholders, is about to be tested in the face of gradual draw-down of UNMIL.

Whilst there has been no large scale or systematic violence since the end of the civil war, the sources of conflict that contributed to the war are still very much present. Furthermore the fragility and vulnerability of the Liberian state was dramatically exposed by the outbreak and severity of the 2014 Ebola epidemic, which highlighted some of the cracks in both the state’s capacity to provide public goods and services (particularly the delivery of adequate public health services) as well as in the social fabric of Liberian society, more generally. The process of building and consolidating peace is therefore a necessary and ongoing one for Liberia, and there is a need to identify, understand and draw from the potential assets and strengths at all levels of society in order to ensure that peace is a nationally owned and contextually relevant process.

During the eight months of intensive field consultations across fifteen counties, and during which over a thousand Liberians were consulted, participants outlined several historical and contemporary factors that informed their perception of what underpinned peace, and they gave concrete examples of the strategies, resources and capacities that they drew on to recover from past violent conflict and prevent its recurrence. These form the basis of the current executive summary which is a synthesis of a forthcoming full length report and will inform the work of the National Working Group in phase II of the research.

METHODOLOGY

The overall research approach is guided by the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), so as to ensure that the contents are rooted in local ownership. The P4DP research teams have acted as facilitators and enablers of a consultation process conducted through focus group discussions and key informant interviews, in which the respondents - Liberians from all sectors of society and from all regions and counties - were given the central role. This approach is fundamental to a legitimate understanding of resilience through the voices of the local population in order to help us identify resilience structures and processes at different levels in Liberian society that may support lasting peace.

The subsequent phase consists of constituting a national working group composed of eight to ten Liberians of diverse backgrounds, skills and expertise who will meet regularly in order to deepen the research and propose methodologies for assessing resilience in ways that resonate with the unique Liberian context. Although P4DP maintains a non-prescriptive nor preconceived approach— what we often refer to as a ‘blank-sheet’ approach – to such consultations, a set of guiding questions were developed to stimulate and navigate discussions during the consultation phase, in order to facilitate the desired objective of the study. Based on the dialogue with focus group participants and interviewees, the P4DP research team compiled an outline of the resources, capacities, skills, strategies and mechanisms that people observed in themselves, in their communities, as well as at the institutional and national levels, as contributing to the resilience of Liberians in the face of both long term structural threats to peace and more immediate shocks such as the 2014 Ebola outbreak.

In this respect, it is important to note that the consultations took place against the backdrop of the Ebola outbreak, although this “shock” had not been factored into the initial research design. In addition to the practical constraints posed by the crisis and the ensuing state of emergency, the research orientation itself had to be reviewed. The Ebola crisis came as a “dangerous opportunity” for a research project on resilience as it provided the unique conditions for the live observation of how resilience to external crises interacts with resilience to internal, structural threats and how resilience to a natural disaster, relates to resilience in the face of threats of conflict. Therefore, in addition to looking at the capacities, resources and strategies of Liberians that make them resilient to violent conflict and the threat of violent conflict, the consultation also sought to understand how the Ebola crisis was relating to – and impacting on – existing threats to peace and how Liberians endeavored to cope with this dual threat.

In total, 59 focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with an average size of ten participants each, 86 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were undertaken and seven group interviews were also held with participants. 1,152 stakeholders, of which 62% were males and 38% females, were consulted throughout the fifteen counties. Participants were chosen from different sectors in order to ensure representativeness: including, for example, women groups, youth, business people, rural women, farmers, Ebola survivors, traditional leaders, people with disabilities, bike riders (“*pehn-pehn boys*”), government officials, etc. Participation in all sessions was voluntary, inclusive and participatory, and participants were free to express their views about the study in the most candid manner and atmosphere, free of interference, and free to leave at any time if they chose to do so. The recruitment of participants for FGDs was, to a large extent, done by P4DP during the initial ‘scoping and identification’ pre-consultation phase, with the support and collaboration of a ‘local facilitator’ who familiar with each community’s dynamics and the issues of FAR. This was also to foster local ownership and give room for the process to be driven by community people.

P4DP consulted many more people than planned as there was immense zeal and enthusiasm on the part of Liberians to participate in the group dialogues. Also, the government imposed State of Emergency (SoE) aimed at preventing the further spread of Ebola inhibited the free movement of many people who consequently could not return to their permanent places of residence and who were eager to attend the discussions. Consequently, more participants than those who had been contacted came to the meetings and it was difficult to turn them down. It was also observed that some participants were quite emotional and viewed the dialogue space as one which they needed to express their thoughts and feelings. Considering the exceptional circumstances occasioned by the Ebola crisis, P4DP felt that there was a need to accommodate these additional voices, even if the size of some of the FGDs was a bit unwieldy. Other extraordinary precautionary measures were also taken from a health and prevention perspective, in order to conduct the consultations under the harsh conditions of Ebola-related curfews and restrictions on movement and assembly.

FINDINGS

Definitions of Resilience and Peace in Liberia

At the outset of the research, an operational definition of resilience was used as a basis for designing the focus group discussions and interviews. It was defined as: *‘the capacity of individuals, households, communities and institutions to anticipate risk, resolve challenges collaboratively and non-violently across societal divisions, respond creatively to conflict and crisis, and steer social change in ways that foster shared benefits of peace and development’*.

Throughout the research, it was observed that there are nuances in how Liberians understand the vocabulary and notion of resilience across the fifteen counties. For example, in Grand Gedeh, Maryland, Grand Kru, River Gee and Sinoe Counties, where there are three major languages (Kru, Sapo/Krahn, and Grebo), resilience is defined as *“Plawor-cou-wa,”* and *“plou-won-peh”*, in the Krahn language, meaning *“unmovable in the midst of challenging situations”* and *“being satisfied in heart”*; while peace to them is *“living together in freedom and being in unity”*. In certain part of Nimba County also the traditional understanding and source of resilience is *“gbazier¹”* in the Mano language, whereas peace in the same Mano language is defined as *“kwakeaba”*, which means *“togetherness”*. In Lofa, resilience is described as: *“the Inner courage to withstand difficult situations and survive”*. In Bong it is *“Yapalolei”*-describing *how one survives during hardship*. From the point of view of the kpelleh tribe of Bong County, they see themselves as one common people, and therefore seek to protect one another, in the midst of the prevailing challenging situations, and resilience in this context is understood as more akin to social cohesion.

The nuances in the definition of resilience stem from the diversity of realities and concomitant worldviews and cultural frameworks that exist across counties and among different population groups. However, although acknowledging that Liberians’ understanding and approach to the *concept* of resilience is non-linear, complex, nuanced and diverse, there are nonetheless striking similarities across counties in the coping and adaptive *strategies and responses* as manifested in the various initiatives developed by individuals and communities.

¹Gbazier is the name of a snake, in whose name a socio-cultural group is formed and named.

As expressed by the Liberian President, “Liberian people are resilient people” considering what they have gone through during the war and recently the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), yet they are still moving forward or bouncing back. However, what precisely makes Liberian people resilient has not been systematically documented. Thus, in this study, we try look at how resilience manifests at different levels: individuals, communities and institutions, and whether the capacities and strategies being used to address the drivers of conflict are only short-term “coping” mechanisms or if they provide longer-term potential to positively transform the drivers of conflict within Liberian society.

Resilience to what? Conflict drivers and the Ebola crisis

In its conceptualization of the consultation process, P4DP recognized the need to define more precisely what it is that people have been or are *resilient to*. Notions of resilience to conflict in general, or violent conflict in particular, were felt to still be too broad to enable respondents to describe effectively what actions they take in order to cope with these phenomena. Therefore, included in the consultation process was an explicit dialogue on the *specific* threats to peace or drivers of violent conflict that the people consulted actually confront.

Those consulted described many threats to peace or drivers of conflict, but these can generally be grouped into three broad categories: (1) Shifting gender roles and identities of women within existing patriarchal structures in Liberian social life, was seen to contribute substantially to a lot of individual and household-level conflict and violence; (2) the weakness of the state manifested in the inadequate provision of public goods and a perception of governance failures, erodes trust between the state and society; and (3) increasing pressure on land and the absence of effective regulation, fuels conflict and potential violence. In addition to these three threats, the Ebola crisis as an external shock, and the ways in which it has undermined social cohesion is an additional factor that exacerbates the three underlying threats described above. The findings are organized along the lines of the threats as described here; as it is in respect to these that the resilience of Liberians is being documented and analyzed. The impact of Ebola is treated both as a theme that cuts across these three drivers of conflict and as an independently important phenomenon for understanding resilience in Liberia, warranting a separate and distinct section of this report.

Shifting gender role of women and the Liberian social structure

Liberian women are more vulnerable to violence in Liberian society, both manifest and structural because of the polarization of gender roles and the patriarchal image of masculinity which sometimes encourages aggressive and misogynist behavior.² During the consultations, women participants identified the following, amongst others, as key problems they face: marginalization in certain political offices; social inequality in the wider society; the disruption of their economic activities due to the outbreak of Ebola; and sexual harassment at border checkpoints.

² World Health Organization, Violence against women The girl child, July 1997

With Liberia having the first female president in Africa, the expectation is that the marginalization of women and associated vulnerabilities would decrease or be eradicated. While there are enormous efforts being made both by government and non-governmental stakeholders to address gender-based violence, the changed gender roles and identities that the war brought about have left many men feeling powerless, such that some still try to exert their power and control domestically. As a result, women continue to face various forms of discrimination and abuses, in and out of the home.

'We women are marginalized in high offices at the county level rather they only put us in Mayor Position which requires keeping the city clean. I vied for the Commissioner position, but the men worked against me that women cannot perform. We formed our group to be advocate for our rights.'

- Women FGD, Zwedru.

The impact of Ebola also has particular gender dimensions. For instance women were often the most affected by the transmission of the disease because they are the care-givers. In the context of massive breakdown of health services, many women delivered their babies on the streets. For many rural women, Ebola devastated their daily livelihood activities and the State of emergency and prohibitions on gatherings undermined the basic premise of and processes of cooperative production in the rural economy. The closure of markets, for example, limited women's capacities to generate income and therefore fundamentally undermined their livelihoods. Meanwhile, a UNDP report³³ on the socio-economic impacts of the Ebola virus in the three affected countries noted that women's reproductive and livelihood needs are to be prioritized because they serve as the foundations of any resilient community. Clearly, the Ebola epidemic not only exacerbated women's vulnerabilities, but even the recovery from it has the potential to reinforce existing gender-based inequalities and stereotypical gender roles.

Coping strategies make women resilient and resourceful, but some come with risks

Women have come up with many initiatives and strategies in order to face this situation, many of which have the potential to address the source of the problem itself and have proved to have the potential to be transformative both at the individual and community level. Examples include the joint holding of community dialogues to enhance solidarity and overcome political marginalization, making backyard gardens to sustain subsistence, organizing themselves into village savings clubs and *Susu*, and migrating to areas where there are more opportunities (which they usually referred to as "USA") in order to overcome the risks of economic marginalization. Women also described adopting new measures as a way of coping. Some referred to this as: 'slow-way', a resilient response, through which women use illegal routes to cross international borders for the purpose of trade. One female participant in Maryland County explained that: "...it is very hard for us to even describe how we are making things work but I can tell you we are doing 'Go by Chop' and 'slow-way'..., we make way out of no way, because we want to survive"- Cross border Woman, in a Mixed FGD Maryland County.

The 'Susu' and the 'Kuu' clubs (group formed around communal savings and farming, through which members rotate or take turns in benefiting from communal contributions to help them through tough times), as well as other similar cooperative measures, are all positive responses to economic hardship as they aid women to organize and promote social cohesion in their homes and in the wider community as well. Such collaborative efforts cut across all women's groups irrespective of ethnicity, religious or political identities. These are organized in similar ways around common challenges and concerns, as self-help approaches. These economic arrangements developed by women, as well as the community dialogue this entails, constitute noteworthy positive responses

³³UNDP- Assessing the Socio-Economic Impacts of EVD in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. December 2014

because they both enhance solidarity among women for positive change at the community level, and also enhance women's self-assertiveness for empowerment and equality.

Some of the 'coping' mechanisms however, in particular, migrating to the "USA" for better opportunities and adopting the 'slow-way' measures can and have proven to not only increase the vulnerability of women, but also threaten rather than strengthen social cohesion more broadly. While they provide individual women with immediate economic alternatives and autonomy, they create social disorganization in the family and create security challenges at the borders. Women who use the 'slow-way method to engage in their business are susceptible to sexual harassment at the hands of border security officials, as well as risking their lives while crossing the Cavalla River with local canoes. More generally, assertive women with ambitions for achievement and willingness to challenge stereotypical gender roles, have been seen by some men as threatening their own roles and opportunities for higher achievement, frequently creating situations of tension.

The role of gender in society is an important one with consequences for social harmony and stability. It is important that both men and women occupy and/or challenge their gender roles in ways that promote peace and social cohesion rather than contribute to violence, whether at the societal level or at the individual, household level, community or institutional levels. The patriarchal nature of Liberian society means that women are often the first to bear the brunt of violence and the population group most devastated by the effects of war. As a result, they have developed many innovative strategies to deal with the physical, psychological and social violence that they inevitably face. Some of these measures are themselves potentially transformative, and can contribute to effecting positive change in the gender norms of Liberian societies. But this is not necessarily the case and on the other hand, some coping mechanisms can endanger the lives of women and can undermine social cohesion.

Perceptions of a weak state: Governance deficits and the lack of Access to Public Goods

Inadequate provision of public goods and delivery of services, unequal distribution of wealth and the lack of employment opportunities, has created mistrust between the citizens and the state. Some participants perceived that there is also an entrenched system of preferential treatment for certain elites and the mismanagement of public resources for the benefit of a privileged few. The enduring presence of UNMIL and sustained reliance on international support are seen as an indication that the international community is nurturing dependency and weakening the State's responsibility for governance. Despite the pledges of international actors to aid effectiveness and commitments to principles such as those contained in the New Deal requiring the alignment of donor funds with national priorities and a dedication to inclusive politics, a strong feeling was expressed by informants that international actors have not always been effective in holding the government accountable for the aid it receives. These views exacerbate the existing mistrust in the government and contribute to the frustrations of Liberians who feel that they do not hold the reins of their society.

The 2014 Ebola outbreak dramatically reinforced many of these sentiments as it exposed the vulnerabilities and fragility of the Liberian State, and in particular its dysfunctional public health system in the face of such a natural disaster. The health sector crumbled because of poor infrastructure. Moreover, funds allocated to fight the disease were said to be diverted and mismanaged by the government. The anger and frustration among citizens during the early months of the Ebola outbreak reached a peak with the West Point incident, when government forces fired at a young boy in response to protests against quarantine regulations, graphically illustrating both the mistrust and the potential for violence that can ensue.

The state's weakness and incapacity to provide adequate access to public goods is seen by many to contribute to undermining the socioeconomic well-being and standard of living of Liberians. For many informants, this is seen to be manifested in the form of high rates of youth unemployment, illiteracy, apathy, illicit cross-border activity and insecurity, teenage pregnancy and internal and cross border migration. Government is widely seen as responsible for not addressing these concerns. Although 63% of Liberia's population is younger than 25 years, the 2012 Fragility Assessment for the New Deal indicated that youth unemployment was one of the key factors contributing to continued interpersonal violence and organized crime. Page | 7

Finding other means of accessing public goods: Community Initiatives and Risk Taking among youth

People at different levels have devised various means of dealing with the consequences of these governance deficits on the part of the state. The ways in which different groups have devised strategies for accessing or creating new livelihood opportunities is illustrative of how Liberians in general have found alternatives to the State for accessing public goods such as healthcare, education, employment opportunities and security. Communities rely heavily on the guidance and support of local leaders and chiefs to carry out development projects.

Many informants noted that young people often seek to take advantage of skills training programs offered by NGOs, church groups or even the government to equip themselves with marketable skills. However they noted that the enduring problem is that skills training do not guarantee jobs and trained people without jobs are often even more frustrated due to the mismatch between market needs and acquired skills. In the face of the imperfect implementation of – and access to – these programs, young people often devise alternative survival strategies such as through involvement in motor-bike “gangs”. This group popularly called ‘Pehn-pehn boys’ has economic utility at salvaging harsh economic situation through alternative economic activity in the transport sector, and also provides young people with a sense of belonging and a group identity that is empowering. However, it is a group that is easily mobilized by politicians for self-interest and by their colleagues for self-defense. As a result, Pehn Pehn boys are often seen to be disruptive and violent rather than ‘positively’ resilient. Similarly, girls turn to “migration to the USA”, as described above, which whilst providing economic opportunity, puts them at risk as they often resort to prostitution, and other illicit activities, once in the “USA”.

It is however possible to observe the formation of youth groups and the initiation of youth activities that carry less risks whilst being empowering, and which also have a positive effect on community cohesion. Young people also get involved in intellectual discussions and engage their leaders in ‘Hataiye shops’ around the country. Popular Sports tournaments ‘the County Meet’ has promoted peaceful co-existence and social cohesion in the last ten years under President Sirleaf.

From the consultation process it appears that resilience strategies targeted at youth must pay attention to their socialization patterns and the implications for empowerment and their sense of identity and belonging, whilst also providing economic opportunities. Furthermore, this logic applies more broadly to the alternative strategies that people and communities devise for accessing other public goods such as healthcare, education, security and justice.

Getting to the source of the problem: talking about governance

Our consultations illustrated that Liberians are quick to link their everyday hardships and lack of access to public goods to structural issues such as the inadequacy of public policies and diverse forms of corruption that beset all levels of government. In addition to finding everyday responses for the symptoms, as illustrated by the example of youth livelihoods above, people are also proactive in targeting the root of the problem itself. The actions range from passive forms of resistance such as no voting during elections, to actively engaging with the government

officials. There were also many community initiatives which sought to reclaim ownership of various development programmes to ensure they were well run and accountable. This trend was illustrated by numerous examples of community-based “self-help” in the provision of security. Local communities frequently formed community defense groups to fill in for the State and to protect their own communities. However, those consulted also described how often these groups also risked becoming vigilantes, preying on the very communities they claimed to protect, rather than being accountable to them.

As noted, we were informed how many Liberians initiate public dialogue with government officials to discuss the problems of poor governance and get involved in media advocacy through talk shows on radio, print and electronic media. Others resort to violent demonstration in order to express their frustration, disappointment and resistance. In essence, the desire to change what is perceived to be wrong with the government is a healthy expression of democratic sentiment and, indeed, potentially of transformative resilience as well. However, some strategies promote violence whereas others do not reinforcing the view that that resilience can and does actually manifest in various forms, some more inherently benevolent than others.

Increasing pressure on land and the lack of effective regulation

Land has always been a major source of livelihood for Liberians. However, it has also been a source of violent conflict in both urban and rural Liberia due to the increased pressure on land. The means available to regulate property and address land disputes are limited and often ineffective. As a result, people, communities, organizations and companies resort to violent measures such as land grabs, which in turn fuel ripostes and sometimes degenerate into further violence. Double land sales by unscrupulous land dealers have led to deadly interpersonal conflicts and endless litigation. Disruptions of the operations of multi-national corporations, ethnic/community tensions and family feuds resulting from land/property disputes have culminated in major conflicts in some parts of Liberia. Unresolved land/property disputes resulting from multiple title-holding have also led to ethnic rivalry, for example, among the Mandingoes and Gio in Nimba County.

The Ebola crisis also increased pressure on land due to migration and the widespread resort to farming as a survival strategy as the economy contracted and other forms of livelihood began to evaporate. Also the out-migration of people living around the Crematorium and the mass-burial burial grounds illustrated some of the passionate concerns associated with land issues for Liberians and demonstrates some of the sensitive and controversial impacts of Ebola in respect of this issue.

Revival of traditional conflict mediation mechanisms to solve land disputes

The Government of Liberia, both through the formal legal system and via special committees and the *Land Commission (LC)* does offer some regulation of land acquisition and ownership in an organized formal way. Recently the Land Commission and National Legislature enacted the Criminal Conveyance Law, which criminalizes double land sales, a hydra-headed problem in urban Liberia, particularly Monrovia and Paynesville, cities with very large populations. The LC has good laws that protect the weak, but its functions and visibility is rarely known to those in the interior.

Compensation to parties involved by the government has also helped to resolve some of the issues. Through compensation, most of the disputes are resolved but sometimes, they are counterproductive because the measures are not framed in a 'conflict sensitive' manner and therefore have the potential to do 'more harm' because it creates problems for the cases of land and property disputes where there the option of compensation is unavailable.

'Land disputes are resolved the traditional way. We rarely go to court because our people respect our traditional judgment'

- Acting Superintendent, Grand Kru

Liberians consulted rarely favored the formal legal system as they believe it seldom resolves disputes without both expenses and an appeal. Instead, people tend turn to traditional dispute and conflict mediation mechanisms, including *dialogue community*/traditional dispute resolution strategy through Chiefs using Palava hut and town hall meetings. Acknowledging the positive role of Town Hall meeting in preventing community land conflict, the Development superintendent of Grand Gedeh County, stated that: "...with traditional Elders, consultations are being made continually to resolve land disputes." Palava hut and community dialogues initiated by traditional leaders were described as very effective means of mediating land and property disputes and seen to be means that are trusted by the population. The Palava hut is a symbol of dispute and non-violent conflict resolution throughout Liberia.

It is important to recognize that the traditional dispute mechanisms that exist in Liberia are an asset and an important source of resilience for individuals and communities that have few alternatives for resolving their land and other disputes by peaceful means. However, having recourse to such mechanisms rather than the formal legal system risks further undermining the state legitimacy and capacity by bypassing it altogether. Increasingly however, there are NGOs and other local CBOs that provide some support in the area of land dispute resolution and it is important that in their interventions, they draw on both the formal and traditional regimes as a means of strengthening the resilience to violent settlements of land conflict, rather than contribute to contradictions between the two systems.

The impact of the Ebola crisis and its responses on social cohesion

This research took place in the midst of the Ebola crisis in Liberia, and unlike structural and long term drivers of conflict, this manifested as a sudden and unpredictable, external shock. Ten years of continuous relative peace in Liberia was disrupted by the outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus, which first impacted the health sector, but quickly began to impact other sectors of the state, the polity and the economy, thus gradually reversing the peace and development dividends that the nation had built up over time. This shock interacted in important ways with the other drivers of conflict that are identified in this research.

Prevention measures that are not sensitive to Liberian values and societal norms erode trust and social cohesion

Many of the prevention and precaution measures required to halt the spread of the Ebola Virus disease have had devastating consequences and decimated social cohesion and social ties among people and further eroded trust in the government in the wake of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia. The outbreak has torn lots of Liberian cultural norms and values that webbed everyday life. Some of the most prominent examples of this that were raised by those we consulted, include: replacing burial ceremonies with cremation, and the effective ban on traditional burial practices (mat-sitting), *'no eating something'*; the prohibition of public gatherings including traditional bush

schools (*poro* and *sande*), formal schools, markets, churches and mosques; and other disruption of socio-economic activities such as *kuu & susu* groups. Moreover, the highly militarized initial response to Ebola through the establishment of a state of emergency, curfews, the closure of borders, and the deployment of troops, all emulated and conjured up the imagery of past violence conflicts.

Some of the Ebola prevention measures did more than simply weaken social ties, some actively fuelled conflict and incited violence. The halting of traditional wake-keeping and halting of the people's age-long traditions of burial and the accompanying rites, was described by those we consulted as having "opened new wounds" that would take a very long time to heal. For instance, the sudden introduction of cremation to the Liberian society associated with a time of national emergency, was unacceptable to broad segments of the society, and was radically opposed by the traditional councils. Liberia is a society where people revere their loved ones at death and friends show their love and sympathy while others socialize. It is a business ground of some sort for others who organize logistics for such occasions.

Besides burial and wake keeping, Memorial Day celebration is also a special day set aside by the national government for citizens to honor their dead. Unfortunately, the Ebola epidemic has created tension around such strong values, attaching a form of stigmatization to those whose loved ones have been buried in unknown graves and locations, or cremated without reference. The Liberian handshake, which is form of connectivity as well as sign of friendliness and acceptance among Liberians, was effectively prohibited because it was a means of contracting the highly contagious disease, thus weakening social ties among people once culturally connected. Further, the '*no eating something*' has weakened the bond in some homes between couples, and it was claimed had often given rise to marital conflict. The ban on all forms of gatherings impacted agriculture negatively thus leading to food insecurity and the quest to find alternative means of livelihood, such as weaving and attending NGO capacity building workshops among women. Some of these adversely fueled high levels of mistrust, suspicion and stigmatization, both between people within these communities, as well as directed by citizens and communities across the country, towards the government.

Innovation and Community Initiatives to address Ebola have the potential to empower communities and strengthen social cohesion

The Ebola crisis has also demonstrated the resourcefulness of Liberians and, precisely because of the ways in which the impacts of Ebola emulated and mimicked many of the experiences of mistrust, suspicion and social dislocation associated with violent conflict, some of the mechanisms used to cope with Ebola have the potential

'Ebola has brought some strange things in our country, like that cremation, it is against our culture and tradition and it is very wrong. After this Ebola there is going to be a major conflict; people need to know what happened to their relatives' bodies'.

**Community Leader, Montserrado
County**

to positively transform society and reinforce capacities for peace as well. For example, the crisis has led to the resuscitation of traditional security measures, specifically the '*stranger-father phenomenon*'- where a new-comer is linked with the person who brought him or her into the community. The "stranger-father phenomenon" has been a means of maintaining social cohesion in communities in the midst of conflict or where there is a risk of the intrusion of conflict, as everyone is known and therefore the probability of stranger coming into the community to foment trouble or to commit crime becomes more remote. This effective "security practice" is now gaining legitimacy because of the outbreak of Ebola and illustrates how people become innovative

and “rediscover and reinvent” systems they have developed previously when confronted with new shocks and stressors.

Another example of potentially transformative resilience is the creation of community task forces on Ebola, which helped communities to watch over themselves. In the context of the crisis, the task forces promoted religion (prayers) to help people persevere, prevented visitation that might contribute to the further spread of the Ebola virus, and undertook contact tracing to help community members to monitor themselves through increased use of social media and mobile phones, as well as to pass on preventive and educational messages. Community initiatives spearheaded by local leaders and other highly motivated community members, such as backyard gardens, reliance on previous savings and remittances, etc., have been critical in sustaining livelihoods in the face of interruptions to normal economic activity.

Page | 11

Ebola prevention measures channeled through community initiatives and organizations, such as the banning of new entrants to communities and the promotion of new hygiene measures (regular hand washing, etc.), have proved more effective at containing the spread of the virus, without compromising social cohesion to the same extent. The importance of such sensitivity is reflected in the fact that cremation has recently been replaced with dignified burial, accompanied by programs for reconciliation and remembrance. These show respect for those who lost their loved ones during the Ebola crisis and enable them to preserve memories for their dead and overcome stigmatization in Liberian culture that was associated with not having proper graves for their loved ones.

Successful community strategies could be leveraged for other purposes, including future programs for development or helping to spread peace messages and building relevant community hubs to coordinate activities. Meanwhile, developing programs that promote good values and norms to enhance work around cultural alteration that Ebola created can contribute to consolidating peace in the long-term. This theme plays at the level of the individuals, the community and through institutions.

CONCLUSION

The consultation phase of the FAR nationwide project sought to understand the capacities developed by individuals, communities, households and institutions in response to specific threats to peace, as well as to the Ebola crisis. Participants passionately spoke of several strategies, resources, skills and capacities that they developed in order to face and even displace those threats. All these demonstrate resourcefulness, innovation and indeed resilience on the part of Liberians. The question of whether these responses and strategies necessarily contribute to peace is more complex and it can be observed that some of the strategies cited contain inherent factors for violence if not properly managed. Moving forward therefore, it is important to understand these capacities, strategies and resources of resilience better, and in particular how they relate to violent conflict so that they can be used as an effective basis for building peace from within the existing strengths and assets of Liberian people.