



Securing Healthy Lives and Sustainable Livelihoods for Young People in Liberia

Learning brief

September 2017



YMCA

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The project in a Snapshot

Project Title

Securing Healthy Lives and Sustainable Livelihoods for 10,000 Young People in Liberia

Duration

40 months

From January 2014 to April 2017

Location

Ganta and Yekepa (Nimba), Gbarnga (Bong), Zorzor (Lofa) and Zwedru (Grand Gedeh) in **Liberia**

Partners

**Y CARE
INTERNATIONAL**

<http://www.ycareinternational.org/>



www.ymcaliberia.org/

Funders

UK's Department for International Development

Big Lottery Fund (BIG)

UK and European Trusts and Foundations

Y Care International



Budget

GBP £1,000,000+

What we wanted to achieve **back in 2013...**

Outcome: Improved economic and health status of 10, 000 vulnerable young men and women in 5 target locations (Ganta, Yekepa, Gbarnga, Zorzor & Zwedru) in the four counties (Nimba, Bong, Lofa and Grand Gedeh) in Liberia.

Output 1: Increased sustainable livelihoods for at least 800 vulnerable young people in 5 target locations including at least 60% young women.

Output 2: 10, 000 vulnerable young people access quality health information and services in 5 target locations

Output 3: Empowerment of 1, 320 young people to advocate for improved livelihoods and health support.

...what we achieved as of April 2017

- ▶ 866 young people completed vocational skills training with a retention rate of 99.5%. Of them, 843 also gained business development and management skills¹.
- ▶ 76% have secured employment or established a business that allows them to earn US\$95 per month on average. The starting point was US\$8 per month.
- ▶ 100% of them now save regularly. The starting point was: 19%.
- ▶ 659 (76%) joined Village Loans and Savings Associations which help save and borrow money that they can invest in their businesses or use to respond to external shocks.
- ▶ At least 29,247 (200% more than originally planned) young people benefitted from health peer education in Gbarnga, Ganta, Zorzor, Yekepa and Zwedru thanks to 20 trained youth
- ▶ 93% of them wash hands with soap and water (as compared to 26% in 2014).
- ▶ 90% of them now reject major misconceptions about HIV transmission by sex (in 2014, 55% of young women and men we surveyed didn't think that or didn't know if HIV/AIDs can be contacted during the first sexual intercourse)
- ▶ 98% of the youth participating in the project report an improvement in their wellbeing.
- ▶ 76% young people reached by the project now taking part in decision making at local levels. The starting point was: 15% reported having ever spoken to local/regional decision makers
- ▶ 99.6% of young people reached by the project feel they have full capacity to overcome their problems. Starting point was: 57% of young people surveyed feel that they can *partially* confront and overcome their problems.
- ▶ In at least 3 of the project locations, young people have been elected to/appointed in County/Council positions. This was simply not the case before.
- ▶ The Youth Advocacy Groups are called for action by local authorities to settle problematic matters in the community.

¹ For disaggregated data by sex, please refer to the final evaluation report available on line here: <http://www.ycareinternational.org/publications/securing-healthy-lives-and-sustainable-livelihoods-for-10000-young-people-in-liberia/>

Some Insights

As part of our end-of-project review (March 2017), project team and project beneficiaries have been asked what they have and have not liked about the project. Below is a selection of their answers (all quoted as stated):

What are you most proud of about the project?

Project team members' selected answers:

- ▶ I am most proud that under this project, beneficiaries are earners and income generators of their own
- ▶ In my branch, at least 64.4 per cent of females, who had no skills and were marginalized in their homes and communities, have acquired skills and they are marketable.
- ▶ Young women and men of various background received free maternal health and VCT services at the Equip Clinic where we had MOU



Project team & beneficiaries at the end of the Final Review Workshop, April 2017

- ▶ A forum was provided for young people to go out and voluntarily know their HIV/ AIDS status
- ▶ Feedback collected from the two health centers Fee Pentecostal Clinic (FPC) and Yekepa YMCA Clinic (YYC) have clearly showed sharp increase in the numbers of Young women and men that accessing SRH and other related health services as the result of SRH workshops and awareness activities.
- ▶ School's authorities allowed and appreciated the presence of our PHEs on their various campus to provide health educative messages to young people
- ▶ It has served as a medium for which the hard – to – reach (ghettos owners, drug abusers, commercial sex workers, school drop-outs etc.) members of the community has been educated on their rights, roles and responsibilities in the society
- ▶ It has served as a driving force to unite the Ganta City Council Office with the heads of the Ganta General market in finding an amicable solution to garbage dumping
- ▶ As the result of young people continuous peaceful engagements some local/national leaders are now considering the young people as partners.

About personal and professional development that resulted from the project:

- ▶ *'Through YMCA-SHL project staff development component, I was able to obtain a certificate in Monitoring & Evaluation. As result of said training and mentorship received under the M & E Officers on the project, I was able to effectively serve as M & E Assistant to complete the project when the M & E Officer resigned. [...] My dignity was restored; [I] became well respected within my family, the church, the community and by my peers. I have a source of income and am a proud 2nd semester Networking student at Blue Crest University. I can happily say that I am not just Morris Kamara, Jr. but Morris Kamara, Jr. with a greater hope for success! I wish there were another YMCA-SHL',*
 Morris, Data-Entry Clerk (2014-16), then M&E Assistant (2016-17)



ACTIVITIES	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT
School Health Clubs						
Sports/Journalism						
Barren Agriculture						
Outreach II						
Civic education/ advocacy training						
Waste education						
Budget monitoring						
Nutritional education						
Peace mobilization training						
School Agriculture						
Roadside agriculture						
Financial literacy training						
ALL						
Sanitation						
CSOs + PSCs						
Mobilization						
Reporting						
Comm. plan						

What are young people most proud of about the project?

Project beneficiaries' selected answers:

- ▶ *'Since I started this training with the YMCA, my life is improving and I'm proud of myself. My friends and my trainer have encouraged me to leave the street and go back home. My parents can now talk good things about me to other people but first only bad things they used to say about me. [I] am also learning how to talk to and work with other people, which is good for me', Molefee, Zorzor*
- ▶ *'I am proud to be the only female doing auto mechanic in Ganta under the SHL project', Ruth, Ganta*
- ▶ *'I am proud that I was able to pay my mom's hospital fees a few months ago when got sick. This is thanks to the VLSA I am a member of, Amos, 15, Zwedru*
- ▶ *'I feel so proud of myself that I can appear on radio talk shows to create awareness amongst young people and the community on issues affecting young people. I am proud of the YMCA for making me to realize who I really am', Wender, Yekepa*
- ▶ *'I have gained skills and knowledge that I did not have at the beginning. I am now a problem solver in my community and even in my family. I feel proud and happy because in a given society/community people must learn to find an amicable solution when concerns and issues are raised and a peaceful means in solving that issue. It is in finding a common ground that people co-exist in a community', Nelson, Ganta*
- ▶ *'I have become self-sufficient. With the stipend I received for being a peer educator, I am now able to pay my college fees. [Plus] I used to be very shy. I didn't have the capacity to stand... and now I am the new President of Gbarnga Youth Council at the YMCA! Even my friends now respect me a lot', Peter, Gbarnga*



What were the main challenges to achieve the changes we expected?

Project team members' selected answers:

- ▶ With most of beneficiaries being *babies mothers*, the need for care giving and at the same time learning became difficult to endure
- ▶ Deplorable road condition makes motoring difficult and increases prices during the raining season.
- ▶ It was not easy to maintain and successfully graduate our livelihoods beneficiaries and having them placed into saving clubs, right after the end of the Ebola outbreak. Especially for cohort one (1), it was not an easy task to track them after their graduation.
- ▶ The beliefs by community leaders, local authority and other stakeholders that young people are inexperienced therefore they should not be allowed to part of any decision making processes that will affect them.
- ▶ Unnecessary bureaucracy may deny young people access to public information
- ▶ With the deadly Ebola disease virus lurking in every corner of the community and our community being one of the epi-centers of Liberia [Ganta, Nimba county], Peer Health Educators (PHEs) were confronted with a huge task to spread health educative messages and reach out to members of the community
- ▶ The impact of the deadly Ebola virus disease and the willingness of community dwellers to listen to PHEs, health care workers and have access to health services



Lessons learnt, applied and shared

Our learning in a nutshell:

- ▶ The more community-led and -owned a project is, the more it is relevant, efficient, effective and sustainable → focus on **Project Ownership**
- ▶ The more a project is experienced and implemented as an opportunity to learn and grow, the more likely it is to have long lasting effects → focus on **Capacity-building**
- ▶ The more attention is paid to the outcome level, the fewer resources are spent on ‘ticking boxes’ and the more significant changes are. Both intended and unintended → focus on **Behaviour Change**
- ▶ The more creative and listening skills are deployed, the easier it becomes to address challenges and contribute to positive results → focus on **Adaptability**
- ▶ Young people are open to new opportunities , and project teams and relevant partners can create them → focus on **Opportunities for Skills, Assets, Networks, Resilience and Voice**

Project Ownership, or our **Project as a ‘Pretext’ for Community Development**

Project ownership is essential to achieve results and make them last longer, gain efficiency and foster project visibility.

How did we stimulate project ownership?

- ▶ **Working through well-established local partners.** The project was implemented by the YMCA Liberia, active in Liberia since 1881, well-known in the areas where they are present and recognised by the Government of Liberia².
- ▶ **Responding to identified needs.** Through consultation at project development phase, we were able to design ways to respond to those needs that the population in target areas recognise as their own. When the project started, community sensitisation activities were conducted which helped build trust with the local population and agree on priority actions and approaches. One-to-one meetings were also organised with stakeholders such as health care centres, vocational training providers, etc. When needs changed (e.g. during the Ebola outbreak), the project was able to adapt to the new context and designed new activities and strategies to respond to the change in the situation. The community felt it was ‘their’ project.
- ▶ **Building trust and confidence over the years.** Project ownership needs nurturing. The more project stakeholders gain responsibility and see their participation levels increase, the more they are willing to contribute to make the project a success. A phased and cascaded approach to this aim worked well in the context of our project. For example, at the beginning of the project, YCI was comparatively more involved in day-to-day decision-making than at the end; at the end, suggestions and even decisions from the field became more and more frequent. See also the **Capacity-building section** below.

² In recognition of the ‘work of the YMCA over the years to address some of the dominant social issues affecting Liberian youth in the areas of youth education, youth livelihood development, youth health and wellness’, the Liberian Ministry of Youth and Sports supports the YMCA with a special allotment of its annual budget for the period 2014 to 2017.

- ▶ **Involving all concerned stakeholders.** Project ownership was promoted at various levels and in various forms – see box on the right for examples.

Box 1 – Stakeholders' Involvement at every level:

- **Community level**, through e.g. Community Steering Groups (CSG). 13-15 Community representatives (leaders, business owners, training centre managers, young people, etc.) sat on these committees and initially met every quarter. Gradually the frequency of their meetings increased to monthly in addition to ad-hoc meetings;
- **Beneficiary level**, through their involvement in designing, planning and monitoring activities. For example, beneficiaries introduced competitions between school clubs, they tailored the rules of the Village Loan and Savings Associations they joined and they offered their labour to build youth business hubs in Zorzor and Yekepa which the project could only partly fund. The project organised planning retreats in Yekepa for peer health educators, youth advocates and peer peace mediators. And beneficiaries took part in bimonthly meetings with project team to discuss progress, challenges and potential solutions (see also below);
- **Project team level** – both at each branch and at the headquarters. This was done through a cascaded approach with YCI promoting project ownership among the YMCA's staff based at the office, and the latter promoting project ownership among staff at the field offices.

- ▶ **Collecting, and responding to, feedback from beneficiaries.** This allows identifying the way forward together, which in turns improves the understanding of beneficiaries' needs by project staff and satisfaction levels. It provides insights on how to improve activities/services to better respond to evolving needs. Beneficiary feedback analysis was conducted at branch, head office and YCI level, which directly informed on-going project implementation.

Box 2 – Stakeholders' feedback mechanisms

Feedback from **Project Beneficiaries** was collected through:

- **Monthly/fortnightly meetings** including specific meetings with training providers. For example, these led to adjustments made to the schedule of transport allowance provision and to researching food support arrangements e.g. liaising with the WFP in Zwedru;
- **Regular and ad-hoc CSG meetings** including at least 2 young people as beneficiary representatives;
- **Community mobilisation meetings** to launch new activities or share plans on mass awareness-raising events;
- **Monitoring visits from YCI and head office-based staff** which systematically included focus group discussions and/or 1-to-1 interviews with young people participating in various activities;
- **1-to-1 sessions** with project staff when issues were raised by individuals and/or deserved confidentiality; and
- **Mid-term review.** 260 young people were surveyed, 120 were consulted through focus group discussions and 8 took part in the workshop. This, along with the Branch Coordinators meetings and the End-of-Project workshop were also opportunities to share feedback both on the project performance and on the evaluation findings.

Feedback from **Project Staff** was collected through:

- **Monthly reports, monitoring phone calls and monthly monitoring field visits** by head office-based staff, and
- **Quarterly reports and annual monitoring visits** by YCI. / For example, on a quarterly basis, the YMCA responded to the following two questions in their reports to YCI: How have you collaborated with YCI to date on this project? and How do you think this could be improved?

- ▶ **Having clear and specific roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders.** These were discussed at the start-up workshop and evolved throughout project implementation. Clarity around systems and processes was essential to maintain clarity around roles and responsibilities. When this was not there, e.g. with regards to monitoring and evaluation during the first part of the project, efficiency was affected. All-staff workshops are helpful in addressing similar challenges e.g. the MTR workshop was helpful in reviewing and improving M&E systems. In future projects, it could be useful to have M&E tools and systems shared at the start-up workshop and involve the whole project team in their review since the beginning.
- ▶ **Aiming for (and achieving) great communication.** Between different stakeholders at each location (through meetings, regular visits, etc.), between the branches (through a group on Messenger), between the branches and the headquarters (through calls, visits), between the YMCA and YCI (through Skype calls, emails, visits).
- ▶ **Acknowledging challenges.** In some cases beneficiaries'/community expectations encounters financial, material, time constraints. For example, young people on vocational training were expecting and requested transportation and food allowances across all locations and all cohorts; our budget and project design only included provision for transportation allowances. In these cases, it is important to facilitate beneficiaries' understanding of the scope of the project and create agreement around it – for example, advocating for support from other stakeholders (e.g. training providers, WFP, etc.) or scheduling payment according to more convenient calendar.

The result was that the project had **positive impact both at individuals' and community levels** with increased economic, health and civic empowerment on one hand, and increased cohesion and trust on the other hand.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Involve all stakeholders and let their participation grow.
- ✓ Listen, respond and be flexible. A project will only be relevant as long as stakeholders see it relevant.
- ✓ Be transparent about what is possible and realistic with the available resources. At the same time, encourage all stakeholders to contribute or to identify others who may contribute.
- ✓ Recognise changes. This means understanding changes in the life of beneficiaries, in the context, in the relationships between various actors.
- ✓ Recognise contributions when claiming project results. And create space for recognition – for example, we invited CSG members to attend the end-of-project review workshop differently from we had done in previous review workshops, in recognition of their crucial role!
- ✓ Do not be shy. Make the project visible, both its activities and its outcomes – for example, we regularly shared updates within YCI through emails and pictures, we liaised with other organisations in country, including public and private institutions.

Capacity-building, or our Project as a Process of Growth

Development projects are a form of investment. We implemented our project with the aim of provoking positive changes during the set timeframe as well as of developing capacity so that momentum could be sustained and/or stakeholders would be better equipped to face future or unresolved challenges.

Note: in our project, we have approached capacity-building as a way to build resilience too.

How did we build capacity?

- ▶ **Using a holistic approach**, including investing in developing skills, assets, network, resilience and voice. See also [our thematic learning](#) below.
- ▶ **Promoting a culture of learning among all stakeholders**, including beneficiaries, staff members and community members, through both formal and informal spaces. For example,
 - Young people (beneficiaries) extended their training time to include days over Christmas, organised peer support groups, etc.
 - Project Officers shared stories of failure at the mid-term and end-of-project review and provided advice to each other; following the MTR workshop, they started to consult with each other on the phone about the appropriateness of certain programme management choices; under YCI's guidance, they participated in exchange visits to other project locations, realised how the same challenges can be addressed in different ways and how valuable assessing various options is; etc.
 - Community Steering Groups' members valued their meetings as a space to come together, discuss about the project progress along with other community issues.
- ▶ **Providing opportunities to take on more responsibilities**. This was done both informally (see [Project Ownership](#) above) and formally e.g. the Data-Entry Clerk was promoted to M&E Assistant, the Project Manager was promoted to the YMCA's Operations Manager, Peer Educators and Youth Advocates (beneficiaries) were invited to run for the YMCA's Youth Council elections and in some cases were elected to leadership positions.
- ▶ **Promoting access to decision-making around project resources**. Project branches, health centres and beneficiary groups received funds on a quarterly basis and prioritised activities accordingly to e.g. build business hubs, renovate or expand their premises, co-design training programmes, carry out mass or smaller-scale events, etc. To note: this also meant that certain locations or groups were more successful than others because decisions made proved more appropriate. For this reason too, exchange visits and consultations proved valuable.
- ▶ **Celebrating success**. This helped building capacity in the form of visibility, credibility and new connections. For example,
 - City or school authorities assigned a role of spokespeople or mediators to school clubs, health peer educators, peer mediators and youth advocates;
 - YMCA branches benefitted from increased membership thanks to the numerous opportunities that they were able to offer to young people and to their endeavours and recognition in the communities
 - Our project has been featured on various communication materials from Y Care International, building staff and beneficiaries' confidence and motivation.

Box 3 – Capacity-building opportunities for project staff

- **Resources allocated to staff development.** For example, the project team attended training on the Village Loans and Savings Group methodology and an M&E workshop took place, the M&E Officer attended a specialised training, etc.
- **Exchange visits between branches.** These were not initially planned but proved extremely helpful to both get exposure to project activities and beneficiaries' stories in other locations, and to reflect on one's own practices.
- **Multi-stakeholders workshops** including start-up workshop, mid-term review workshop and end-of-project workshop with participation from beneficiaries and Community Steering Group members.
- **Social media platform.** The YMCA staff set up a Messenger group where achievements were visualised through pictures, celebrated and commented upon.
- **At-a-distance technical support.** Provided by YCI from the UK through emails, Skype calls, report revisions and resource-sharing, and by the YMCA head office-based staff to the field staff.
- **Team work** between YCI's and the YMCA's staff, the YMCA's head office and field staff, project Officers from different branches, Programmes and Finance staff, staff and other stakeholders in each location, etc.

The result was that stakeholders at the end of the project reported feeling empowered, being in a better situation than before the project and equipped to face future challenges.

Recommendations

- ✓ Facilitate exchanges between team members, with other organisations, between beneficiaries and between Community Steering Groups (or their equivalent).
- ✓ Ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and that they can evolve over time. Staff members need incentives to foster their motivation. Providing learning opportunities helps as it helps to recognise achievements and progress.
- ✓ Provide training as well as opportunities to apply learning and to reflect about it.
- ✓ Accept failure... and learn from it. Do not blame delays and challenges; instead show positive examples and explore alternative routes. Consider peer-to-peer review e.g. at workshops or through exchange visit. Look after project team's morale and motivation.
- ✓ Identify the starting point and the initially available resources. This helps measuring progress as well as celebrating it! At the same time, do not be scared of changes.
- ✓ Focus efforts on specific capacity to build based on needs, responsiveness and available resources. Remember that while projects are time-bound, personal/ professional/ organisational development continues projects end.
- ✓ Be equitable in providing capacity-building opportunities but do not hesitate to invest in those (individuals/organisations/groups) who manifest the greatest engagement or the fastest results. They may become role models and/or able to help others too.
- ✓ Remember that learning is a process, not an action, and individuals/organisations in different roles or positions learn differently.

Behaviour change, or our Project as a Process of Facilitation

The mid-term review was a crucial time for the project. Most output targets had been achieved or were on track to be achieved. The team had identified contributing factors such as **strong project ownership, investments in capacity-building**, strong leadership at the YMCA and a trust-based relationship with YCI. The case was different for outcome level target, due to time as well as to focus. The focus had to shift from input provision to behaviour change.

How did we facilitate behaviour change?

- ▶ **Using multiple approaches jointly.** For example, in terms of SHR, we used 1-to-1 informal sessions, group meetings, formal training incl. for service providers, etc., as well as investments to foster individuals' self-worth and to improve their environment (emotional, physical e.g. health care facilities, etc.). When health sensitisation was not systematically accompanied by referrals for medical care or medical care services were not affordable, behaviours were slower to change.
- ▶ **Showing the relevance of the change.** For example, improved hand-washing practices contributed to the decrease, then to the end of the Ebola outbreak; the use of condoms reduced the risk and frequency of unwanted pregnancies; gaining and practising skills helped generate income; saving at the Village Loans & Savings Associations (VLSA) allowed access to credit; defending youth rights in a peaceful and organised way led to recognition from adults (e.g. school parents' associations), elders and authorities; etc. When the relevance of changing behaviour is not (made) clear, behaviours do not change and even knowledge levels tend not to be affected. For example, 96% young people at the end of the project were aware of HIV/AIDS transmission through sexual intercourse while only 60% were aware that HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through blood transfusion.
- ▶ **Investing in role models.** People, especially young people, need to see what the change may look like – this is particularly true in a context of high disenfranchisement like the Liberian context. This proved extremely important to influence relationships between generations and between genders.
- ▶ **Fostering change ownership** (see also **Project Ownership** above). For example, young people were more likely to remain engaged with the VLSAs when the internal rules and regulations were tailored to their needs.

The result was that behaviours changed at individual (e.g. increased skills, increased assets, increased recognition, etc.), household and community (e.g. increased cohesion, increased youth participation), and organisational level (e.g. increased collaboration, increased beneficiary involvement, etc.), and these effects are likely to be sustainable.

Recommendations

- ✓ Be ready to diversify options and activities because one approach does not fit all and the context evolves over time.
- ✓ Constantly listen, observe and analyse the environment to identify bright spots, role models and champions. Invest on them and make them visible.
- ✓ Support the project staff to be patient and ambitious at the same time. Things need time to change, but not much will change in the expected way if efforts are not made.

Adaptability, or our Project as a Process of Change

People, contexts, conditions change all the time, partly as we expect and partly unexpectedly. The resources set at the beginning of the project are unlikely or less fast to change, so there is need to adapt plans and approaches.

How have we adapted to the changes?

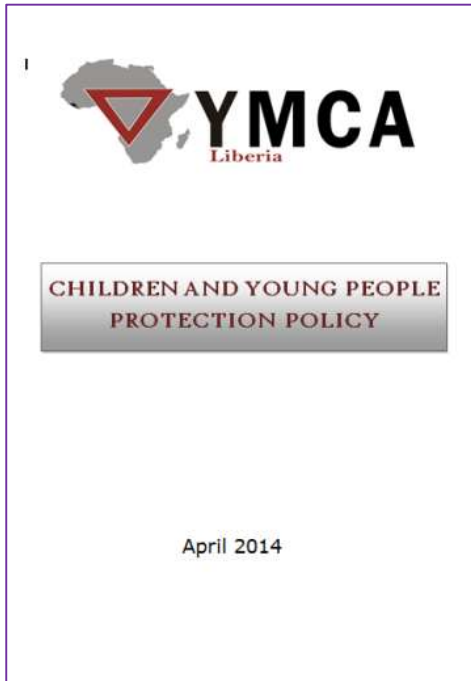
- ▶ Investing time, efforts and resources in building project ownership, spaces for dialogue and trust (see [section above](#)). These provided the basis to understand how change was happening and what new needs were coming about. It helped e.g. making arrangements with trainers to assist young people in whose families relocated from Yekepa following the downsizing of the main employer there.
- ▶ **Regularly monitoring budget spending and re-prioritising expenditures.** Budget flexibility is needed to adapt to learning and to changes in the environment, especially because not all risks can be foreseen at project design stage e.g. Ebola outbreak, GBP's loss in value, etc.
- ▶ **Focusing on the outcomes.** For example, when it was clear that the community leaders and business owners would provide advice and mentoring to the young people for free, funds were re-oriented towards other forms of post-training support e.g. the construction of business hubs.
- ▶ **Incorporating disaster risk reduction and mechanisms to sustain changes** following the emergency response. We revised our activities in light of the Ebola emergency e.g. school health clubs had initially been designed to promote sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and good practices. With the Ebola outbreak, it became more relevant to use the clubs as a space to promote good hygiene practices and during the course of the project, they maintained a double focus.
- ▶ **Leveraging additional funding.** This was particularly needed during the Ebola outbreak to respond to the emergency, and to secure funds for the extension period. The project required 4 additional months to catch up with the delays due to the Ebola outbreak (9 months of suspended activities) – which had cost implications. We were able to leverage additional £109,966.87 (12% of the original budget) during the course of the project thanks to our understanding of the context and needs and to the ability to demonstrate achievements.

The result was that the project managed to achieve or exceed targets despite significant challenges in the environment. Its relevance improved during the project despite the significant changes in the project context, and value for money was achieved thanks to a meaningful allocation of resources.

Recommendations

- ✓ Be creative and inclusive* in your problem-solving processes. Take note of what has changed and why. It will be useful in future programming and at reporting stage.
 - * Include project team as well as beneficiaries, other stakeholders, donors, etc.
- ✓ Design a sustainability strategy since the beginning of the project and involve all material stakeholders. Review your assumptions and do not be afraid to invalidate them as long as you are able to identify new, more accurate ones.
- ✓ Be open to changes and to suggestions for changes.

- ✓ Find the right balance between direct interventions, e.g. provision of vocational training, and investments in structures / services that will remain e.g. health care centres, VLSAs, etc. Use changes to leverage other changes.
- ✓ Consider including a contingency fund and/or crisis modifiers in your budget. Advocate for contingency funds to become more common practice!
- ✓ Mainstream disaster resilience and invest in disaster preparedness at institutional (YCI/YMCA), project and community level.



Budget adjustments in 2014: Savings on staff costs funded the development of a Child & Youth Protection Policy for the YMCA, crucial for a youth-focused organisation and required by DFID.



Ebola emergency response: Hand-washing facilities set up across the project locations in 2014. One year later, they were still in function.



Ebola recovery: 40 young women and men received capital injection to revitalise their businesses affected by the consequences of a prolonged Ebola outbreak.

Youth Focus, or our Project as an Opportunity to... Create Opportunities!

Our project involved young people aged 15 to 24 and included three main components i.e.

- 1) **Economic empowerment** through vocational training, access to jobs or entrepreneurship;
- 2) **Sexual & reproductive health** through peer education in the community and at school; and
- 3) **Civic education** through youth-led advocacy, youth-led peace mediation & peer education.

We have learnt lessons under each thematic area and have summarised them following YCI's results framework.

Facilitating Opportunities for Skills Development

- ▶ **Community Steering Groups' involvement.** On the basis that the young people in the project were community children ('our children'), with no financial return, the CSG provided weekly visits to the training centres, mentoring, and liaison with trainees' families and with religious leaders. 'If they succeed, we all succeed' (see also [Project Ownership](#)). The CSGs' involvement also implied a form of social pressure on the young people who did not want to disappoint their leaders, families, etc.
- ▶ **MoUs between the young people, their families/care-givers and the YMCA.** A first MoU was signed for the duration of the vocational training and a second MoU upon provision of the start-up kit. MoUs also strengthened the young people's sense of responsibility and the community participation in their endeavours.
- ▶ **Market demand, career orientation and young people's 'passion'.** Young people need orientation to identify livelihoods opportunities that both are viable and correspond to their personality and ambitions. Project staff and volunteer community members (CSG) can provide this orientation but need to be trained on this. Relevant market assessments should inform this orientation.
- ▶ **Vocational training on its own is insufficient to provoke long-lasting changes.** More impactful results are achieved when training is associated with sports, music and other recreational events (following the YMCA approach) and with post-training support (see [Asset Development](#) below).

Facilitating Opportunities for Asset Development

- ▶ **Nationally recognised vocational training.** This improves both young people's self-confidence and their ability to access jobs. It was the case e.g. in Zwedru for young people graduated from the Zwedru Accelerate Vocational Training Programme.
- ▶ **Access to Employment & Enterprise** – contributing factors:
 - **Young people's focus and commitment.** This can be raised through life skills training, mentoring and peer pressure.
 - **Family acceptance.** Evidence from the project shows that this is not necessary but enables the process; at the same time, the lack of it can be detrimental to career achievements.

- **Tools** – to practise skills and to become an ‘asset’ for employers / workshop owners. The latter are keen to offer placements and in exchange have additional workforce and equipment items.
 - **Passion & accountability of service providers** such as vocational training providers, health workers. Positive relationship with the trainers/workshop owners led to apprenticeship opportunities or referrals to other employers. This was achieved through the mediation of the project team and the CSG, the involvement of trainers within the CSG itself and, more generally, **community ownership**.
- ▶ **Unexpected income improvements among training providers**, in particular workshop holders – thanks to (i) the remuneration received from the project, (ii) the increased number of human and material* resources, and (iii) the ability to accept more commissions.
*After the training, young people who were hired by their training workshops brought their tool kits with them, which became additional equipment at the workshops.
- ▶ **Food for work.**
- Short-term. Very successful during the Ebola outbreak, both to respond to immediate needs and to contribute to community cohesion and improved hygiene conditions.
 - Long-term. Young people on vocational training expressed their motivation to get involved in food for work schemes during their training courses to access food and to ‘give back’ to the community that was helping them.
- ▶ **Access to contraceptives at the health clinics.** These are subsidised by the Liberia’s Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW) and available for free to those who access the family planning services. Peer educators raised awareness around these services in coordination with the health workers.

Facilitating Opportunities for Network Development

- ▶ **Role played by the CSG members** as relationship brokers with potential employers, workshop owners/landlords, etc., as well as references/guarantors for the young people needing to prove their seriousness and determination.
- ▶ **Joint work between different beneficiary groups / across outputs.** This helped increase outreach and effectiveness. For example, it helped create a ‘critical mass’ of young people (peer health educators, youth advocates, and peace mediators) involved in tackling the same issue from different angles. And it allowed vocational training beneficiaries to also benefit from SRH peer education.
- ▶ **YMCA’s approach**, including creation of times and spaces for young people to gather and positively influence each other through recreational activities, sport tournaments, etc. The YMCA membership was promoted through the project. This approach fostered stronger links amongst the young people, as well as between the young people and the YMCA. This provides young people with a network on which they can rely for support generally as well as in times of crisis.

Facilitating Opportunities for Building Resilience

- ▶ **Village Loans and Savings Associations.** Differently from what was included in the project design, the team encouraged all young people (not only a selection of them) to join savings

and credit groups, which were characterised by high standards of transparency and mutual accountability; possibility to choose the amount to set aside on a weekly basis; and opportunity of accessing credit as well as a social fund. This proved successful and young people were motivated to join and promoted savings around them. Spontaneous demand for this service was generated in the wider community as community members started to join the groups too.

- ▶ Emergency response measures were introduced when Ebola struck, including knowledge around Ebola symptoms, effects, contagion; community awareness-raising led by young people; set-up of hand-washing facilities; food for work; food distribution to orphans; equipment provision to health centres.
- ▶ Emergency recovery measures were also introduced into the project design: maintenance of hand-washing facilities in function; collaboration with school authorities and school parents' association for the implementation of safe schools protocols; capital injection to revitalise affected businesses; psycho-social counselling sessions; intensified and more regular risk assessments.

Facilitating Opportunities for Speaking Up and Influencing

For the young people to develop their capacity to express their views, defend their rights and influence others, crucial contributing factors are:

- ▶ **Setting specific advocacy targets** e.g. relocating a wild garbage dumping site which is threatening the health and safety of the neighbouring community as it happened in Ganta in 2015 or adopting the Safe Schools Protocol in a particular school. This implies managing young people's expectations of which battles are worth fighting in a certain timeframe and with what level of efforts, and helping them develop the capacity to assess this. Specific targets are easier to achieve, and achievements contribute to building young people's confidence and demonstrating their catalytic role to external stakeholders.
- ▶ **Building alliances** with **(a)** like-minded organisations, organisations having a stake in the issue or having previous successful experience. This helps create a critical mass, facilitates idea generation and serves as safety net; and **(b)** with authorities or influencers that may need the support of 'implementers'. This helps adopting win-win approaches and worked well on the project to the point that youth advocacy groups were called for action in case of issues and health talks institutionalised at Yekepa's schools.
- ▶ **Perseverance and peaceful engagement.** This implies equipping young people with skills and attitudes that will protect them from frustration. The latter may translate into demotivation and/or aggressive behaviours and compromise the young people's credibility and commitment. Life skills, including communication and conflict-resolution skills, are essential.
- ▶ **Finding the appropriate balance between what needs to change and what can be changed.** For example, the project decided to deprioritise advocacy engagements around the National Youth Bill taking into account structural challenges (e.g. disconnection between the central government and the population of the target locations) and specific circumstances (upcoming elections, misplacement of the document by the parliamentarians, etc.). This was considered the most efficient option; however, it contributed to maintain young people's limited (if any) linkages with public policies.
- ▶ **Accessing positions at the YMCA's Youth Councils:** (local level) individuals from SHL project are now members of the YC, help facilitate meetings in the community and contribute

to the branch capacity e.g. PHEs are helping setting up new Hi-Y clubs, SRH has been introduced at the Hi-Y clubs and trained young people have strong leadership skills; (national level) the NYC should be involved in the lobbying activities for the National Youth Act – action points to agree at the end of the General Assembly (28th March). S2C ambassadors should liaise with FLY and increase their involvement

Providing opportunities to young people led to multiplier effects. Young people reported increases in their self-confidence and improved relationships with their peers and with adults, such as school authorities, governmental authorities, and health workers; they established peer-to-peer support mechanisms and developed the ability to creatively solve their problems or maximise their resources. Adults and elders also confirmed these improvements and their confidence in the role that trained/prepared young people can play.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Update Market analysis throughout the project. Include budget provision for this. Consider using participatory approach and building local capacity to conduct market research and/or business feasibility studies.
- ✓ Involve local trainers and relevant professionals in designing and tailoring the toolkits for the vocational training graduates.
- ✓ Invest in creating an enabling environment for learning and applying learning, including families, religious and traditional leaders, service providers (e.g. staff from vocational training centres, health care centre, etc.), local and district authorities, private companies, etc.
- ✓ Invest in building the beneficiaries' sense of responsibility for their endeavours and the positive change that is foreseen – through MoUs, direct contributions from their side, quantitative targets to access their stipends/incentives, etc.
- ✓ Include risk and safety assessment of project locations and provide safety tools / equipment as appropriate. This may concern hygiene items (e.g. at schools after the Ebola outbreak) or items specific to certain vocations/trades (gloves and glasses for metal-workers).
- ✓ Adapt services or products to the specific needs of your beneficiaries, e.g. differentiate between young women and men, tailor services to young mothers / young people with disabilities, etc. Recruit staff that is knowledgeable or experienced in those specific needs or provide technical assistance to help the staff develop the necessary knowledge and skills. At the same, treat beneficiaries equitably – if peer health educators receive a stipend, consider the implications of not providing stipends to other groups e.g. youth advocates.
- ✓ Carry out stakeholder mapping and keep it updated.
- ✓ Remember that working with the most vulnerable is highly resource-intensive but has the potential to lead to biggest and most impactful changes.

Perspectives

Next steps for YCI/YMCA work in Liberia

Programme and Organisational Development

- ▶ Explore the opportunity of linking Village Loans and Savings Groups (VLSAs) to the YMCA's local branches in a way that they help promote a culture of savings and at the same time help set up income generating activities for the volunteers who run the YMCA core activities.
- ▶ Measure the long-term effectiveness and relevance of the business hubs.
- ▶ Incorporate the youth advocacy groups into the Youth Councils, and ensure that future projects build on these existing structures.
- ▶ Strengthen the relationship with the Federation of Liberian Youth and design mechanisms to connect young people to national authorities, besides continuing the local engagements.
- ▶ Explore both local and international funding opportunities.
- ▶ Develop social enterprises at each branch to both provide young people with opportunities to learn skills and gain work experience, and to generate income to conduct community development activities (linked to the potential opportunities that the VLSA may offer).

Programme Management

- ▶ Mainstream gender analysis by incorporating it into M&E systems, building staff's capacity and requiring it from consultants
- ▶ Introduce a beneficiary feedback log in order to document feedback, responses and changes to the project design
- ▶ Compare learning from this project with learning from Monrovia-based projects

What to assess in a potential impact assessment³

- ▶ Ability of Cohort 2's young people to access jobs and set up businesses as compared to their peers from cohort 1. Cohort 2 completed their training at the end of the project, while Cohort 1 in March 2016 and received 12 months' post-training support during the project.
- ▶ Evolution of the Community Steering Groups. To what extent have they remained engaged with the YMCA? And with the young people? In what way?
- ▶ How sustainable are the young people's businesses? What type of employment opportunities have they been able to access following the end of the project?
- ▶ How sustainable are the VLSAs? To what extent are members willing to renew their membership after receiving their loan? Is there any comparative advantage (or disadvantage) between the VLSAs and other forms of savings & credit groups including the traditional *susu*?
- ▶ Young people's resilience to disasters or crises that affected them or their communities, and the extent to which they were able to cope with these.

³ Y Care International conduct impact assessments of all institutionally-funded grants two or three years after their completion as part of our learning practices and as way to test our approach.

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Y Care International creates opportunities for vulnerable young people across the globe to change their lives for the better. Inspired by and faithful to our Christian values, we work with people of all faiths and none to build a more just world, free from poverty.

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