SITUATION ANALYSIS CHILDREN AND WOMEN IN LIBERIA

BACKGROUND

Liberia is Africa’s oldest republic, founded in 1820 by freed American and Caribbean slaves.\(^1\) It is bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. The country is blessed with the following natural resources; wood, rubber, iron ore, diamonds and gold. However, the used of these resources are not felt by the masses of the country due to the management of them.

Currently the population of Liberia is 3.9 million and more than 50 percent of the entire population lives in Monrovia. Based on this population and her natural resources, it is strange that Liberia still remains one of the poorest countries in the world; it is ranked by the World Bank as among the very poorest countries in the entire world. For a few years in the 1970s, Liberia's per capita income was equivalent to that of Japan.\(^2\) This means that the country can still take her rightful place in the World, if her resources are well managed.

Liberia is still recovering from the nine years civil war that ravaged her. This is very clear from the development that has taken place in the country after the war. The war affected all the different dimensions of the country; the political, economical, psychological, educational, social and spiritual. This has made Liberia to remain a very poor country since 1997 after the peace accord was signed. According to the Liberian government, the unemployment rate is 70 percent (although in a largely

\(^1\) The Heritage Foundation
\(^2\) Global Security
subsistence economy, this figure may be more a reflection of urban unemployment).\(^3\) Liberia's infrastructure was totally devastated during the civil war years from 1989-96. Currently, public utilities, such as electrical power, sewers and running water are provided to only a small portion of the public in Monrovia. Roads in and around Monrovia get minimal maintenance, but roads to the hinterlands are frequently impassable in the rainy season.

Post-conflict Liberia has received and continues to receiving assistance from different donors and government all over the world, yet, she has large foreign debts. Liberia still needs this dependence from the international bodies since they cannot manage their resources due to their attitude of corruption. However, as long as little is done about the governmental corruption that reaches to the highest level of government, it is unlikely that significant numbers of serious investors will be induced to come here. The economy has shown signs of growth, but very little progress has been made in addressing the criteria laid out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for creating an improved economic environment that would attract foreign investment.

According to the African Economic Outlook 2013, Liberia is ranked 182\(^{nd}\) out of 187 countries in the 2011 Human Development index, with an estimated Gross National Income per capita of USD 265 and some 64% of the population earning less than the poverty line of one dollar per day.\(^4\) This shows that Liberia is one of the poorest countries on Earth. This is an indication that the country has a long way to go.

The above is the general background of this study. In a specific way this study is more concerned about the response that the Salesian can give to the children and youth of Liberia who are at risk. The Salesians have been responding to the needs of the people of Liberia in different ways, one of the ways that they (Salesians) have responded was through the presence Don Bosco Homes (DBH). Don Bosco

---

\(^3\) Global Security
\(^4\) Global Security
Homes is a Catholic Child/Youth rights and development organization. It was founded by the Salesians of Don Bosco in 1992, the sole reason for its foundation is to ameliorate the problems of street children. DBH is renowned for its achievement all over Liberia. The Liberians, institutions both religious and secular and the government have good memories of the homes.

The work which the homes have been doing is very Salesian and very close to the heart of our founder Don Bosco. The Salesian mission through DBH has helped to reunify or reintegrate over thousands of children back to the societies and their families. In 1997 alone, during the first disarmament exercise, the centre rehabilitated over one thousand child combatants. This intervention made her one of the leading institutions working for street children and ex-combatants.

Besides, working for and with street children the homes was also involved in; child protection, psychosocial counseling, health services, basic literacy, community life skills training, peace building, advocacy for juvenile and HIV/AIDS awareness. Therefore the beneficiaries of the project range from street children, sexually vulnerable, abused children and youth, children in conflict with the law, children affected by armed conflict, children with disabilities.5

The project was really big and the centre was doing a lot to meet the needs of the children at risk. It is a pity that the project does not exist anymore. What happens to the beneficiaries of the project? Where are they? Have they gone back to the streets? What are they engaging themselves in? For sure the beneficiaries are hoping to see the face of Don Bosco again; they want to be with Don Bosco.

This is not the time to blame anyone, those who have been handling the project have done their best, and it is time we learnt from what has happened. The fact is that the Salesians had no time for the project, the Salesian presence was absence from the project.

5 Don Bosco Link; News Letter, 2007
It is against this background that we are making this situation analysis of youth and children in Liberia to evaluate how we can respond to them and where we can respond as well.

**SITUATION ANALYSIS**

The situation analysis in our study is the way in which the people of Liberia especially the children and youth from the poor areas or backgrounds of Liberian society are living and coping. The analysis also ventures into what their problems are and how are the problems being addressed by governmental and non-governmental institutions.

The starting point for any analysis of the situation of women and children in Liberia remains the long, brutal and turbulent civil war that engulfed this small country during most of the 14 years up to 2003, when a ceasefire was voted by the UN Security Council.\(^6\) This analysis is done using the governmental and non-governmental reports of children at risk in Liberia. From the background of our subject, it is obvious that the situation of the country at large needs interventions. The outcome of the war is still affecting the greater population of the country.

In this section we shall begin by delving into the general situation of the Republic of Liberia in brief before exploring the situation of children and youth. The president of the Republic of Liberia, Ellen Johnson during her lunching of the Children’s Law said, “For too long, Liberia has neglected its children and discriminated against its women. They have been unable to fulfill their potential, contribute to Liberia’s prosperity and benefit from its development.” She said further that as she travelled around the country, it breaks her heart to see what are, virtually, babies having babies, teenage girls raising families when they should be in School. Large numbers of young girls live on the streets, and resort to prostitution to make a living. Many girls, some of them very young, have their dignity and their future undermined by viciousness of rape.\(^7\)

---

\(^6\) The situation of children and women in Liberia UNICEF, 2012

\(^7\) Her Excellence Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia
From all indications, the situation seems to be pathetic even in the eyes of the President. Children are actually at risk, and vulnerable in Liberia. Early pregnancy, street life, illiteracy, sexual abuse, students dropping out of schools, among others, are some of the realities that most children are facing in Liberia.

The Minister of Finance, Hon Amara Konneh, argued that the reason for the high dropout is due the delay of enrolment which also leads to poor learning outcome. Another reason is due to rural-urban migration. Many children and teenagers leave villages for towns in search of better education. This search for better future has always placed them at risk of exploitation; adolescent pregnancies and early marriage affecting girls’ life-time opportunities and choices.

In the Executive Summary of the Situation of Children and Women in Liberia, it is stated in it that fragile livelihoods, youth unemployment, female vulnerability and food insecurity remain critical problems. There is also very uneven access to basic services with much lower access in rural as compared to urban areas. The report also highlighted the fact that youth are not prepared with the skills and attitudes for employment or parenthood.

Let us take note of the following statistics; the population of the country is 3.5 million. This census was done in 2008, in a recent analysis it is stated that the population is now 3.9 million. Child population under 18 years is 1.8 million. Teenage pregnancy rate (15-19 years old) 31%. Population living below national poverty line is 63.8% among them 47.9% are living in extreme poverty. Child labour for children and teenagers within the ages of 5-14 is 20.8. Children living with both parents (under 18) is 47-6%. Child marriage; women within 20-24 who were married/in union before they were 18years old is 48.7.

---

8 2008 national population and housing Census;
9 2008 national population and housing Census
10 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007
11 Core Welfare Indicator Questionnaire Survey 2007
12 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007
13 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007
14 Liberia Demographic and Health Survey 2007
The situation analysis of UNICEF brings it forward that sustainability remains a challenge. In an interview I conducted with the children and women department in West Point Police Station, The officer I had the interview with said that DBH has greatly failed on the areas of sustainability because the home only take the children for two to three weeks and later send them back to their families. Higher percentages of the children go back to street. According to her the home can not actually boast if it has helped any of the street children to acquire academic education. For her the system of taking the children for two or three weeks is not effective for the beneficiaries of DBH. Liberia has come up with many policies to improve the life of her citizens in different aspects of their lives but many of these policies and plans still need to be turned into real gains for children, particularly girls, and women, who continue to suffer from discrimination and consequent disadvantage. The situation of many Liberian women and children in both rural and urban areas continues to be vulnerable.

THE HOUSEHOLD CONTEXT

To understand the situation of things in this country we need to look at the households who are living in poverty. 75% of Liberians are living below $1 a day. The key social protection analysis for Liberia makes the distinction between absolute poverty, a measure of very low income; and extreme poverty, which describes a situation where the household is not able to meet their most basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, health care and education, partly because of lack of income and partly because of lack of access to basic social services such as health and education.

People living in extreme poor households tend to suffer severe hunger for most of the year, become physically weak, sell or consume assets such as tools and seeds, fail to send their children to school, and die from infections that other people survive. As a result, children in these households are effectively

---

17 UN, Social Protection Issues in Liberia, 2008
excluded from basic health and education and the poverty of the household is passed on to the next generation. It is good to note that the extremely poor also have families headed by children.\textsuperscript{18}

**LIVELIHOODS**

Only 15\% of Liberians are employed in the formal economy, mostly in plantation agriculture. This has created the notion that 85\% of Liberians are unemployed. According to this report the Labour Force survey saw a distortion in it and did its best to put things in order by using a less rigid view of what employment and economically productive activity actually comprise. Their survey concluded that around 1.1 million people aged 15 and over were employed, of whom most are working for themselves, or are unpaid workers in a family concern. Using these definitions, it will mean that 78\% of the labour force is in vulnerable employment, lacking the protection of labour regulation.

**CHILDREN AND YOUTH SITUATION**

Many children within the ages of 6-11 are not going to school, yet this is the stage that Liberia most needs to address if the system is not to fail its children and undermine their future prospects.\textsuperscript{19} Among the few parents who are capable to send their children to school, many of them are not in a position to provide a conducive physical and psycho-social environment for the children learning. There are no lights or desks at home where they can work and few parents have experience of education that they can share. This can be worse for those living with peers or in other households. Children can be put under pressure once their guardians realize that their priorities are changing. Many of them with their guardians are actually under pressure.

According to the 2008 population census, of children aged 5-9, 43\% were not attending school of any kind, pre-primary or primary.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{18} The situation of children and women in Liberia, 2012.
\textsuperscript{19} The situation of children and women in Liberia, 2012
\textsuperscript{20} 2008 Census
As children in Liberia enter their teens, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours and exercise their own will about what they are prepared to do. But their maturity also represents an opportunity for them to become responsible actors and active participants in the fulfillment of children’s rights. In age 15, 17% of girls have had sexual relations. In some cases, peers encourage them to get a ‘sugar daddy’, exposing them to pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections including HIV. For most of the girls their main recreation is going with their boyfriends. In addition to that, once girls have reached physical maturity, parents may no longer feel obliged to support them. Their parents may even expect to use some of the girls’ boy-friend income for family support.21

There are many more to say about the situation of children and youth in Liberia, we have touched the core of it. There are different reports and all are sharing similar things. The basic thing we should note is that the situation of children and youth in Liberia is vulnerable, still many children and youth are becoming victims of the situation daily. They need positive respond from humanitarian and religious organization. The work of the Salesians will be very relevant in this country.

During my interview with Mr Miraj Pradhan, the Communication Specialist of UNICEF, he said to me that the children and youth of Liberia seem to be happy but they are not, since they do not have hope about the future. He said that the bitterness of the war is still surrounding them. In this line our Salesian mission is very necessary in this part of the world.

Fr Raphael Airoboman

Insegnante di religione della
Scuola Mary Help of Christian
Matadi Sinkor Monrovia

21 Key informant discussions with UNICEF staff