

11. Progress, Challenges and Lessons Learned from the Implementation of the SDGs: A Perspective of Civil Society Organizations in Liberia

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LIBERIA AND THE SDGs (KEY NATIONAL PRIORITY AREAS)

According to report from a local daily newspaper (Liberia Daily Observer, 27 January 2016 edition) the Government of Liberia in 2016 began the implementation of the global development initiative, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by the United Nations in New York. The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its domestication began with an official launch by President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the Monrovia City Hall on 26 January 2016. The paper added that the occasion was hosted under the auspices of the Government and the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, private philanthropist Dr. Betsee Parker, United Nations Country Team, Save the Children International and other partners.

In accordance with the mandate from the adoption of the SDGs on September 2015 in New York, United Nations Member States were encouraged to integrate its contents into their respective national development agendas. President Sirleaf, according to the paper, recounted how Liberia was in conflict when the first global development agenda was crafted, thereby having no input but had to implement what had been prepared by technicians from the West who ignored local realities on the African continent. In spite of this, she said Liberia began the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) six years after their adoption and had a progress rate of 33 percent. "This time this agenda (the SDGs) included everybody and we must work to have them achieved," she said.

The paper also quoted the former Finance and Development Planning Minister of Liberia, Amara Konneh, as saying that Liberia is a bit ahead in the implementation of the SDGs because the country has already begun the implementation of almost all of the contents of the SDGs in its previous development agenda. Though the 2030 Agenda contains 17 goals and 169 targets, Minister Konneh outlined what he termed as the pivotal ones that the country should pursue. According to him, SDGs 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 16 and 17 must be of priority to the Government.

PROGRESS: ARE THERE NATIONAL EVALUATION DATA TO GAUGE PROGRESS?

There are many more things happening and or not happening in relation to achievement of the SDGs under the Government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf²³³ than are effectively captured in our stories. This in part may be attributed to the limited capacity of national organizations to effectively document and report on achievements of the numerous interventions in different focal areas of the SDGs at the local levels. Intuitively, however, progress on the SDGs may be mirrored from achievements of a different development agenda in Liberia which have been partly integrated into the SDGs. For example, SDG 5 (achieving gender equity and the empowerment of all women and girls) is linked to the previous MDG 3 (promote gender equality and empower women). Under this goal, the Liberian Government and partners (including UN Women through its Gender Equality and Women Economic Empowerment Programme and civil society organizations (CSOs)) have been working on different programmes for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The programming of UN Women in Liberia is developed within the framework of the gender priorities identified in Liberia's 2012–2017 Agenda for Transformation and reflected in the 2013–2017 United Nations Development Assistance Framework. The goal of UN Women in Liberia is to contribute to addressing gender justice and equity through sustained peacebuilding efforts, particularly addressing violence against women and girls, promoting gender equality in governance and supporting women's economic security and rights (UN Women Terms of Reference for Evaluation Reference Group, Peacebuilding Fund Project, 2013-2016).

In order to understand the impact of the intervention, UN Women works through an independent consultant (usually an international consultant) for evaluation of its programme. The recent call for evaluating the UN Women peacebuilding funds in Liberia was published in the first quarter of 2017, seeking an international leader for its evaluation. To date, there are no data that point to a report or work of any national evaluator to support an affirmative conclusion on existing national evaluation capacity.

SDG 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages) is linked to MDG 4 (reduce child mortality) and MDG 6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases). Under this goal, Liberia has made tremendous progress since the end of the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in the country. Feedback from communities through engagement of different CSOs shows that health services in Liberia have relatively improved after the Ebola outbreak as opposed to before the outbreak. Again, there is no awareness through qualitative or quantitative evaluation data that supports any assertion to the level of improvement in the health sector in Liberia.

Under SDG 4 (ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all), the Ministry of Education of Liberia in 2016 focused on essential improvements in the country's education system to ensure that the education system

233 Editor's note: this paper was submitted in October 2017, prior to the election of President George Weah. The paper does not take into account subsequent changes to the national context.

does not fail Liberia's children and youth. As set out in Vision 2030 and the Agenda for Transformation, the country's goal is to achieve inclusive growth and middle-income status by 2030 (Ministry of Education 2016 Report). In 2015, "Getting to Best" was launched with the Ministry's top nine areas for reform which have been developed into a three year "Getting to Best Education Sector Plan". The following are the top four priorities: (1) workforce reform; (2) pay reform; (3) monitoring and accountability; and (4) partnership schools for Liberia (public-private partnership). According to the annual report of the Ministry, it has started paying all teachers and improving the quality of teachers; it is reported that there is an "improved monitoring system" and "accelerated learning outcomes". Unfortunately, it is unclear from the perspective of civil society what constitutes an improved system and learning outcomes. There are no evaluation data that constitute feedback from the larger society of the country. As stated earlier, the country may be doing more or less but it is only through available data that conclusions could be made about progress or regress.

Finally, on progress under SDG 16, Liberia has submitted a peacebuilding plan to the United Nations Security Council, through the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The plan, which is in line with the SDGs and features the Agenda for Transformation, covers five priority areas which include: (1) promoting inclusive and transparent elections in 2017; (2) peace, security and the rule of law; (3) economic transformation; (4) governance and public institution; and (5) cross cutting issues (Country Report, June, 2017).

Current update on the implementation of Liberia's Agenda for Transformation:

- Road map developed for post Agenda for Transformation Development Plan to include, but not limited to, preparing the new Agenda for Transformation (including SDG domestication components);
- Decision reached to domesticate and integrate the 2030 Agenda and African Union Agenda 2063 to our next development plan; and
- Completed alignment exercise of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 to the indicators of the Agenda for Transformation.

The objective of the plan completed by United Nations and the Liberian Government is that peacebuilding in Liberia needs to maintain the momentum of the last 14 years, whilst recognizing the convergence of two transitions; first the election of a new Government in October 2017 and second the end of the mandate of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) on 30 March 2018. This plan provides a well-developed framework for sustaining peace, formulated in accordance with Security Council resolution 2333 (2016), and "directs the role of the United Nations system and other relevant partners in supporting Liberia's transition", during the drawdown of UNMIL and beyond, as provided for by the resolution. (Government of Liberia and United Nations Liberia Peacebuilding Plan, March 2017).

Finally, under progress, according to the Assistant Director for Monitoring and Evaluation at the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning in Liberia, Mr. James Afif Jaber, the Government has started raising awareness of the SDGs with key stakeholders in 12 of the 15 political subdivisions of Liberia (from 13 to 16 June 2016, 23 to 28 October 2016 and 14 to

21 June 2017). According to the Assistant Director, a successor framework to the Agenda for Transformation is currently being developed and is still in a draft form; the document according to him will serve as a guide to the next national development plan when completed. The Assistant Director, however, recounted the lack of adequate funding for carrying out robust awareness-raising with all relevant stakeholders as a key challenge.

THE SDGs AND CIVIL SOCIETY: IS THERE CAPACITY FOR EVALUATION?

Liberia has an established structure of CSOs known as the National Civil Society Council of Liberia. The organization has both national and local structures across the country. Liberia is also amongst nine countries of the informal high-level group on the 2030 Agenda, which also includes Brazil, Columbia, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, United Republic of Tanzania, Timor-Leste and Tunisia.

Significantly, the members of the high-level group have committed themselves to leading by example and playing their part in delivering on the 2030 Agenda in their respective national contexts, and to engaging with other national leaders, stakeholders and civil society when doing so. (High-level group, Champion to be, July 2017).

CSOs have or should have, amongst others, three cardinal roles in the implementation of the SDGs:

1. Creating mass awareness of the goals and key provisions therein for the public;
2. Monitoring the implementation process and providing feedback to the Government and other stakeholders when necessary; and
3. Providing parallel or shadow reports to other stakeholders including the international community about progress, challenges, lessons and recommendations on the implementation of the SDGs.

However clear these roles of civil society may appear, there seem to be both capacity challenge and lack of political will to adequately carry out these functions; these challenges, amongst others, are articulated in the next section of this paper.

KEY CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGs (NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA)

- The national budget serves as a strong pillar for any development agenda. However, there is a disconnect between a very ambitious plan and resource allocation decisions by the Government of Liberia; for example, the national budget for fiscal year 2016/2017 allocates almost 50 percent of the budget for compensation to government employees as opposed to 0.4 percent for public investment projects and less than 1 percent for agriculture. This decision has been consistent in many previous budget years.
- There are challenges in the reallocation of national wealth to subregional structures of Government. To this end, the remittance of social benefits from concession

activities to actual beneficiaries in communities is very slow; for example, Accelor-Mittal, a concession company involved in iron ore mining in Liberia, remits \$300,000 annually through the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning to communities directly affected by the company's operation. However, many affected communities have not received their fair share of this payment up to date as a result of "delay in the remittance process". According to an information gathering report by the United States Agency for International Development and the Accountability and Voice Initiative Natural Resource Management Coalition in Liberia, launched on 19 July 2017, communities have limited participation in the governance and administration of the County Social Development Funds; and lawmakers have highest decision-making power about the allocation and utilization of the funds.

- There is limited awareness about the SDGs in communities; feedback from communities in Liberia shows that not many people are aware of the SDGs and the national domestication processes. In many town hall meetings and community gatherings, discussions and/or actions are faintly linked to the previous national development agenda without linkage to the SDGs.
- CSOs in Liberia have challenges with coordination; accordingly, taking joint actions on issues of national concerns has some bottlenecks. This brings to fore the underrepresentation of CSOs at some regional and international meetings about key development issues including the 2030 Agenda. Sometimes CSO representatives for these meetings are handpicked by the Government based on, perhaps, vested interest.
- There is challenge in producing representative (local and national) evaluation data as a result of, perhaps, a limited funding base to include more robust, bottom-up approach to national evaluation processes. Usually, a very small portion (sample) of the population or key stakeholders is involved in providing feedback to evaluation.

KEY LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE SDGs

When the development agenda is not consistent and aligned with budgetary allocations, it becomes difficult to achieve anticipated results; more than half of the SDGs have links to environment and agriculture, for example. However, the low representation of these themes in the national budget means that more needs to be done to increase specific budget allocations for the SDGs.

The lack of coordination and inability of CSOs to carry out sustained and informed advocacy creates the incentive for Government to ignore its obligation to the people. To this end, the coordination and evaluation capacity of CSOs needs to be strengthened for effective and efficient evaluation and monitoring of the SDGs at all levels

The achievement of the 2030 Agenda needs not only the political will of governments but also the support of CSOs and all citizens. Accordingly, there is a need for partnership between national Government, CSOs and other stakeholders in implementing and evaluating the SDGs.

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