

## Namati Case Study – Accountability Lab, Liberia



### **Briefly describe the situation of the project you wish to feature as your case study:**

In Liberia, trust, cohesion and the rule of law were decimated by 14 years of civil war. Concurrently, the formal judicial system collapsed and continues to struggle with confused laws, minimal resources and few trained legal professionals. Ebola has revealed the continuing structural weaknesses in Liberia as well as the lack of trust in formal institutions.

The Accountability Lab, in partnership with community-based organizations in two of the poorest, most densely populated and excluded townships in Monrovia, has developed community justice teams (CJTs). These CJTs provide non-binding dispute resolution for civil cases. This builds trust, underpins justice and saves both aggrieved parties and their accused time and money.

The service is free of charge and available 24 hours to all citizens- most

of whom earn less than 50 cents a day. It is utilized by all members of the community and promoted via local outreach events, a town crier and community radio. The CJTs provide a much needed outlet for community members to freely and respectfully articulate grievances amidst a context where formal institutions are unresponsive and generally lead to significant frustration and corruption.

### **Briefly describe the original problem:**

The following is just one example of the several hundred cases that the CJTs have resolved successfully and sustainably over the course of the past year. While it is by no means the most serious- the teams have dealt with everything from mob violence to land disputes- it is important because it reflects a conception of justice that also includes dignity and participation. These are hugely important because they lead to a more sustainable, more community-driven process of trust, healing and progress.

Child labor has long been an issue in Liberia - where family sizes are large and economic opportunities are slim. With the closure of schools, prohibition of many forms of public gatherings, and economic collapse due to the Ebola crisis, this issue has recently been exacerbated.

The Citizen's Bureau, one of two community justice teams supported by the Accountability Lab in Liberia's capital, recently mediated a painful, yet typical case that is emblematic of Liberia's challenges.

A group of children, ages approximately 12 - 15 visited the Logan Town office, with a sobbing young girl child, aged 6 - 8 in tow. The young girl was a child vendor, towing a pan of cassava. It quickly became clear that the young girl was deeply upset and unhealthy. She had not gone to the local court, as the community of Logan Town does not have a court; and the issue was not perceived to be serious enough for the police, while schools were closed as a result of the Ebola outbreak.

### **Describe the process of addressing the problem:**

The Citizens Bureau first took the time to show an interest and compassion in a young girl who felt neglected and overlooked in her community. We calmed her down, inquired as to what the problem was and ascertained that she was suffering under the unbearable weight of the cassava she was selling.

The older children with her noted that they had found the young girl crying by the road, tears streaming

down her face, standing still with the pan of cassava lying uselessly on the road. This was a unique case for us - while many of the complaints we have resolved have been domestic in nature with child support being a major issue, we had not previously initiated a case directly as a result of the intervention of youth. But if we are to build the next generation of responsible citizens in Liberia, it is these kinds of cases that are important.

Using our local knowledge, we were able to quickly find out where the child was staying and who the primary caregiver was (an Aunt). We sent a team to visit the Aunt, explaining our work and mission in a non-threatening manner. We drew on much of the training the Accountability Lab had helped us with in terms of mediation, consensus-building and so on- using our words very carefully and adapting them to the needs of the minor.



The Aunt agreed to visit our office and speak about the situation with the child present. She noted that the child was her niece, who had been sent by her father from the interior of the country several months ago to have access to better schools.

Unfortunately, Ebola struck, and with no school to attend, the Aunt, whose husband had recently passed away, decided to put the girl to work.

**Describe any major obstacles to resolving this problem, and how you attempted to overcome them:**

The primary challenge in resolving the case was that the team of mediators was fully aware that the Aunt did not send her child to sell out of malice, contempt, or recklessness. As she noted herself, the household was food insecure and often went days at a time without decent meals. As a result, we made particular efforts to show sensitivity to the difficulty of her situation.

Nevertheless, we spoke earnestly and patiently with the Aunt. Impressing upon her the duties of doing everything she can to shield her daughter from this harsh reality and alerting her to the dangers that an unaccompanied young girl could face on the streets.

We were able to raise a small grant from our personal funds to provide the family with a little bit of food and use our contacts at local schools to procure a scholarship so that the girl would be able to pursue her education to allow her to move beyond her present situation.

We also recognize the economic realities that resulted in the crisis in the first place, so have instituted regular check-ins with the Aunt and her niece to ensure that the child stays on track, attends schools (which have now reopened following improvements in the public health situation) and to ensure that at a minimum, the child is

not forced to carry out labor that she is physically unable to perform. These are small changes, but compassion in a time of crisis and some sense of support and justice in a time of pain are essential.

**What changed as a result of your organization's actions regarding this problem?**

Ultimately, this case worked out relatively well- the girl is back in school and is integrated back into her family and community. But this case showed us that there will be a deficit of justice as long as our citizens struggle to put food on the table. This case was not as serious as others we have dealt with, but a strong community grows from how well it treats its weakest members- and through our mediation services we are seeking to create a modicum of justice in a place where it is hard to come by. Our hope is that this will provide the seeds for larger change and the consolidation of trust and the rule of law over time.

Since our inception, the Accountability Lab and its partners as part of the CJTs in mediation have stressed the need to forge cross-cutting relationships with a variety of community actors, particularly local police officials and local courts. But there will always be cases that are essential to community cohesion but will never move anywhere near these formal institutions- they require the hard-work of real, bottom-up empathy, understanding and support. The successful resolution of this case has only reaffirmed our energy to do this work.

As a result, we plan to invest significantly more effort in grassroots outreach, particularly through the

incorporation of role plays, interactive trainings with a variety of different mediation and legal experts, and peace football tournaments. We cannot afford to consult with only two aggrieved parties at a time when the effects of 14 years of civil war, a century of one party rule, weak formal institutions and Ebola are impacting all our citizens and reducing their access to justice.

Undoubtedly it will be a challenge to ensure that in expanding our scope we maintain our focus on dispute resolution and do not come to be seen as an organization that enables rather than empowers. It should be noted however that the teams operate on very lean budgets, squeezing value out of every cent.

The project overall has been successful- the CJTs have not experienced a single case of recidivism (though some cases take a long time to resolve) and we know that with cases like that outlined above, the life of the young girl will not

be transformed for the better overnight. The project launched over a year ago in its first community, expanded to a second in July 2014, and is set to reach a third community in Monrovia shortly. If the time is taken to find the right mediators, listen hard, understand the context and continually learn and iterate, the model can be scaled up nationally across Liberia.

*Quotation: "There are countless examples in Liberian society of the institutional problems that prevent youth from reaching their full potential and helping to develop their country. With benevolence, compassion, and innovative thinking we can be the catalysts, however slowly, for the critical social change needed to empower our communities and bring justice to all."*

- Mr. John Kamma, Executive Director,  
Citizens Bureau

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