

The Liberian Initiative

After an invitation by a resident of Ghana's largest refugee camp, MBB began to contribute to the rebuilding of Liberia and its people, devastated by civil war. The invitations grew, as MBB heard from community members and leaders, the largest university, government agencies, and local NGOs and churches.

MBB team members have made eight assessment and intervention visits, all self-funded or through the generosity of private donors. Through those visits, the MBB team has developed eight key interdependent components of the Liberian Initiative.

The **first** module helped create a community mediation service and student peer mediation clubs among Liberians living at the Buduburam Settlement in Ghana.

The **second** module involves efforts to rehabilitate, reintegrate, and restore the lives of Liberia's former child soldiers who are residents of Buduburam. None of the former child soldiers has participated in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process (DDR) established by and under the direction of the UN High Commission on Refugees. MBB works, in conjunction with local partners, with these former child soldiers and with the communities that will receive them.

The **third** module involves capacity building in Liberia. To date, MBB has provided mediation and conflict resolution training, in Ghana and Liberia, to lawyers, tribal chiefs, land administrators, police and prison officials, several NGOs' staff, and university graduate students.

The **fourth** module is aimed at designing and implementing interventions to address the need for trauma healing countrywide. Involving international mental health professional-partners and Liberian lay counselors, this effort will promote immediate healing and establish systems for ongoing psychological support and restoration.

To date, the project's emphasis has been on the module designed to rehabilitate, repatriate, and reintegrate former child soldiers living in the Buduburam refugee settlement in Ghana. Research by the UN, the US Institute of Peace, and others shows that one of the critical factors of post-conflict peace is the employment and reintegration of former combatants. This module takes the form of:

Preparation at Buduburam

- During a graduate student's field work, 140 youth, mostly former child soldiers, were screened for their interest and willingness to participate in a rehabilitation program aimed at successful reintegration into Liberian society. The work expanded to become Child Soldier Reintegration Fund (CSRFF), which sought partnership with MBB. A total of 89 men and 5 women participated in some or all of the program.
- MBB provided mediation training to residents of the refugee settlement.
- MBB affiliated with Self-Help Initiatives for Sustainable Development to initiate agricultural training.
- MBB partnered with CSRFF and Society Mission Africa to provide a ten-month vocational training program; this training was accelerated, by being offered in extended hours, to facilitate full program completion before the settlement was closed. Students studied one or more of: masonry, architectural drafting, plumbing, electricity, automotive repair, and tailoring.

- MBB partnered with University of Ghana-Legon to provide psychological assessment and group and individual therapeutic interventions aimed at healing trauma, reforming identity, and preparing to become a member of a Liberian community.
- MBB partnered with National Ex-Combatants' Peacebuilding Initiative (NEPI) to provide assessment, mentoring, group practice, and individual counseling aimed at building the youth's capacity to integrate into communities. Taught from the perspective of ex-combatants with similar experiences, these interventions helped the youth review their own behaviors that might contribute to continued marginalization, conduct reality-testing, practice more productive thinking and behaviors, and begin to reform a healthier identity.
- MBB negotiated successfully with the UN High Commission on Refugees, the Liberia Refugee Repatriation and Resettlement Committee, and the Ghana Refugee Board to ensure that the students were able to remain at the settlement to complete their program.
- MBB investigated partnerships to provide medical assistance to repair wounds and other conditions, visual reminders of wartime actions that can serve to separate these youth from their communities and affect their capacity to form healthy identities. Potential for services was interrupted by the closing of the settlement, but may be resumed after repatriation.
- As the youth are facing returning to a country with >80% unemployment, economic concerns are central to whether peace can be built and sustained. MBB made connections for the youth for possible employment in multiple industries and multiple counties. This included generating resumes, distributing key information to employers and civic leaders, and informing the youth. The youth also participated in coaching and coursework on skills for being a strong employee, carrying out teamwork, and making informed employment choices.
- MBB researched the means of obtaining travel documentation and facilitated the youth's participating in necessary processes with the UN High Commission on Refugees and the Liberian Embassy.
- MBB researched and initiated family tracing for those youth who wished to reconnect with lost family.

Repatriation

- MBB facilitated the processes to ensure that family unity is retained and transport accomplished – both to Liberia's capitol and to the youth's desired final destination – for those refugees recognized by the UN High Commission on Refugees. This was through the generous support of the IOM.
- MBB arranged transportation for those youths and families not recognized under the UN process.
- MBB through donors arranged for short-term transitional housing, food, and some basic household starter items for the refugees on return.

Community preparation

- MBB and NEPI met in each repatriation location with government, tribal, refugee organization, development, civil society, and other group leaders to introduce the program and seek their permission and support to operate in the area.
- NEPI and MBB conducted community group sessions to discuss the program, to surface and begin to address concerns people have, and to solicit their ideas and participation.
- NEPI and MBB met with individuals and representatives of groups, specifically to address their anger or anxiety about the returnees. Using mediation/conflict resolution techniques, they attempt to work through those feelings and concerns and prepare for civil participation in group processes.
- NEPI and MBB conducted large community meetings in each district immediately preparatory to the families' return. These meetings served to coach community members to manage expectations and prepare for the new arrivals; to continue to address concerns and solicit ideas; and to teach conflict resolution skills to use if there are problems with the returnees.

- Throughout this period, NEPI met with organizations and employers to explore possibilities for employment and apprenticeships. NEPI also meets with individuals and leaders who might facilitate other practical support (*e.g.*, arrangements for housing for some families). Individual and public meetings also served to plan for community contribution to integration activities, such as reintroduction ceremonies.

Reintegration

- Once the families returned, NEPI staff and volunteers met with them to continue to develop their skills to fit into the community and to begin to set up households and to support themselves in this new environment.
- NEPI worked with other organizations to generate other activities generating inclusion and normalizing the returnees' presence and membership in the community – welcome receptions; participatory sports events; cultural performances illustrating peacebuilding and forgiveness, etc.
- NEPI and MBB conducted intensive trainings jointly with the returnees and community members. For returnees, particularly, the trainings focus on effective communication, recovery, identity, leadership, fitting into the community, and conflict resolution. Session leaders assessed participants while teaching to adjust emphasized topics to fit the needs.

The sessions involving the community were deliberately structured to ensure a number of community members equal to the number of returnees, representing different constituencies, and able to go forward and influence others. This required advance work to design this structure and identify and recruit the necessary people. The topics were similar to those described above and they also worked on surfacing and addressing fears, anger, and misconceptions between the groups; and worked toward forgiveness and finding acceptable terms on which people can live together. Doing these sessions jointly also helped generate a sense of commonality preparatory to rituals and living together. Leaders were also invited to observe sessions so they were aware of the quality and substance of what the students are learning. These one-day trainings occurred every two weeks for a total of four sessions.

- NEPI arranged traditional cleansing ceremonies where relevant. These serve to release the harms and hurts and have leaders accept responsibility for the returnees as members of this community. They were large public events where government leaders, as well as traditional leaders, presided and were acknowledged, and typically animal sacrifices and feeding the group were central features.
- NEPI continues to meet with organizations and employers to generate possibilities for employment and apprenticeships.
- NEPI oversees work-related cooperatives: supervising any relationships with external artisans, controlling use of money and tools to ensure responsibility, coaching in entrepreneurial skills, and generating self-sufficiency among the cooperative members
- NEPI provides close monitoring and structure to guide the returnees. This includes being present for activities likely to trigger conflict, to be able to intervene and redirect the youth to more appropriate responses. This includes supervising the youth's activities, such as work, school, or training, to ensure consistent and active participation. It includes coaching and mentoring the youth to develop the skills they need to function independently and as members of the community. It involves proactive contacts with community leaders to determine whether conflicts are brewing, as well as problem-solving interventions.
- NEPI is also assisting the returnees with a farming project; this was made possible due to the generous donation of 100 acres by a community member following the return of the students and during the course of the early re-integration activities..

Evaluation

- NEPI is gathering data routinely to be able to assess changes in target behaviors, attitudes, and economic improvement.
- An MBB student intern was in Liberia on a University of Pittsburgh grant to conduct outcome evaluation surveys with the students and the communities to which they returned.
- MBB is seeking university partnerships to make use of that data and other methods to complete an evaluation of the program.