

Evaluation Summary

Evaluation of the Liberia Employment and Entrepreneurship Programme (LEEP) – Mercy Corps

Country: **Liberia**

Sector: **Youth Employment**

Evaluator: **Bodhi Global Analysis**
Date of the evaluation: **2022 / 2023**

Key data on AFD's support

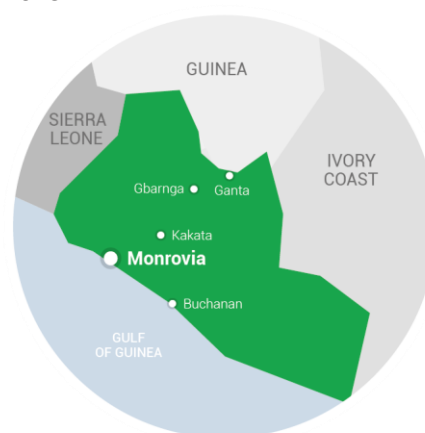
Projet numbers: CLR1009

Amount: 4 000 000 EUR

Signature of financing agreement: 27/03/2019

Completion date: 2023

Total duration: 3 years



Context

Young people are a critical resource for sustaining Liberia's post conflict gains. Out of a population of about 5 million, an estimated 20% are aged between 18 and 24. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), labour force participation for this group is about 35% compared to the national average of 63%. An expanded age range of 18 to 35 accounts for about two-thirds of the total population. Therefore, with a youth dependency ratio of about 70%, youth economic empowerment is strategic for tapping into the existing potential.

Actors and operating method

In partnership with the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and the Liberian Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS), Mercy Corps has implemented the Liberia Employment and Entrepreneurship Programme (LEEP). LEEP is a three-year intervention, implemented in both rural and urban areas of Grand Bassa, Margibi and Montserrado counties.

Objectives

The goal of LEEP was to enable 11,000 Liberian youth, both male and female, aged 18-35 years to find meaningful, market-driven employment or self-employment. It had three interlinked and mutually reinforcing objectives that address constraints to both youth labour demand and labour supply.

Expected objectives:

- **Objective 1** built on best practice from previous youth programmes implemented by Mercy Corps in Liberia, targeting 9,700 vulnerable youth, with a focus on building soft and life-skills to seek sustainable employment or self-employment.
- **Objective 2** aimed to enhance the entrepreneurship capacity and innovation potential of 1,300 youth through access to financial and technical resources and support to budding or thriving enterprises that would enable them to develop and sustain successful business ventures as micro-entrepreneurs.
- **Objective 3** aimed to create private sector partnerships that would influence key private sector actors to address capacity gaps, improve attitudes towards working with young people and increase their agency towards youth engagement.

Performance assessment

Relevance

LEEP's focus on employment and entrepreneurship addressed a fundamental youth need. LEEP took the approach of providing support for both job-focused and business-focused career paths, and catered to youths from a wide spectrum of skill levels.

While LEEP covered a range of activities relevant to youths, the lack of interconnectedness between activities and the allocation of resources meant that the most vulnerable and low-skilled youths were reached in high numbers but received more light-touch support.

Coherence

LEEP was aligned well with MOYS priorities, as the ministry was involved in the design of the program and LEEP built on existing MOYS activities.

Local partners were also eager to collaborate with LEEP to support youths. This included sport clubs/coaches, NYSP/YOJT hosts, high schools/TVETs, technical consultants and SME businesses.

Effectiveness

Most youths have been able to apply skills learned through LEEP. In particular, youth employment trainees found the Career Planning sessions useful as it gave direction and motivation, and applied business skills by starting their own businesses. Although small grants beneficiaries used the payments to start or grow their businesses, they struggled to develop more innovative operating models.

Overall, there is room for improvements in the quality of the activities and in providing a more sustained support to the youth. In terms of equity, LEEP overachieved on gender balance, reaching more female than male participants.

Efficiency

LEEP had very strong internal processes and an operating model conducive to cost-efficiency, which allowed LEEP to overachieve on its reach targets, even with the delays. This was mainly due to LEEP's model of leveraging human resources from local actors and volunteers, including the MOYS, which reduced costs.

In terms of value for money, LEEP's ability to efficiently convert inputs into higher level outcomes (ie. youth employment) was good. LEEP still has potential to increase employment success rates drastically, while raising costs minimally, by improving the quality of programming and focusing more on innovation.

Impact and sustainability

LEEP participants saw a significant decrease in unemployment from 72% at baseline to 18% at the endline. However, the quality of jobs or businesses varies, with many youth engaged in self-employment activities with little earnings and that may not be sustainable. The project also had clear short-term effects on youth gender attitudes.

Yet, all participants stressed that the short duration of the interventions limited its effects as they need further training or financial support to have more lasting career prospects.

In terms of the sustainability, LEEP's partnership with the MOYS and local organisations have led to buy-in and capacity building. However, the model was centred around strong Mercy Corps leadership and financial incentives that will not exist beyond the programme.

Conclusions and lessons learnt

LEEP's reliance on volunteers and local actors resulted in good cost-efficiency, but the focus on reach rather than quality of activities led to lower cost-effectiveness (conversion of inputs to outcomes/impact).

While LEEP catered to youths of different skill levels and both job- and business-focused youths, LEEP would have benefitted from more purposefully-chosen, interconnected activities, with clearly defined career pathways, as opposed to isolated interventions.

LEEP has been effective in reaching its target numbers, including equal gender and most youths have been able to apply skills learned. However, there is room for the quality of training manuals, teaching practices and one-on-one coaching to improve.

To improve programme implementation, LEEP could have prioritised the development of innovative tech-based monitoring and messaging systems to reduce staffing requirements and to improve communication.

To improve the sustainability of LEEP activities, LEEP could have focused more on building links with business service providers and training centres, and should continue exploring private sector interventions, and research, policy and advocacy work.