

NETWORK MEMBER: ACCOUNTABILITY LAB - LIBERIA



From Mob Violence to Child Labor - Bringing Justice to Monrovia's Crowded Townships

★ RUNNER UP 2015 NAMATI JUSTICE PRIZE ★

The **Accountability Lab** partners with civil society organizations in the developing world to build sustainable tools for new and innovative approaches to bolster accountability. The organization works to generate cost-effective relationships based on trust and cooperation rather than co-optation and dependency. In Liberia it is supporting a community justice program.

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www.accountabilitylab.org



The Community Justice Team members in Monrovia's West Point. Photograph by Morgana Wingard.

West Point is an oven glove-shaped spit of land that projects into the mouth of the Mesurado River, just north of Monrovia city centre. Across the river, on the other side of the Monrovia Freeport, is Logan Town. Between them West Point and Logan Town, home to a total of 150,000 people, are the most densely-packed and impoverished townships in Liberia's capital.

Both communities have vibrant main thoroughfares and attract people who need to live cheaply and earn a living close to the city. They are also notorious for conflict, over-crowding and an absence of the rule of law.

In the eyes of ordinary Liberians, the legal system is often expensive, time-consuming, and culturally alien. "At the same time, in urban areas customary dispute resolution systems have become corrupted

and eroded over time," says Francis Lansana of Accountability Lab Liberia. "As a result, many people resolve their grievances through violent means. In a country that has already suffered decades of misrule and a tragic 14 year civil war, more effective, creative informal legal tools - including community-based systems - can play a critical role in providing justice and building peace."

To that end, the Lab has provided training, management support and seed funding to community mediators in West Point and Logan Town to create Community Justice Teams (CJTs). Each CJT consists of seven to eight volunteer mediators, who bring together parties to resolve disputes in equitable ways. The mediators are drawn from all age, gender, geographical and ethnic groups to ensure equity and fairness. The

system is free and functions 24/7, with each case documented by a trained notary. Awareness of the service is raised through a town crier, local radio, and outreach efforts by the CJTs themselves.

The teams have dealt with everything from mob violence to land disputes. One case saw a group of young teens bring a young girl of around seven to the CJT because she was unhealthy and distressed trying to sell cassava in the street on behalf of her aunt. The child had been sent from the country by her parents to attend school, but the Ebola crisis had closed schools and her aunt set her to work.

“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 or recklessness,” says Francis. “The household 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.”

“We spoke earnestly and patiently with the Aunt. Explaining our work and mission in a non-threatening manner, we impressed upon her the duties of doing everything she can to shield the girl from 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 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 could go to school.” Although not a major case, the Lab believes a strong community grows from how well it treats its weakest members and through its mediation services is seeking to create a modicum of justice in a place where it is hard to come by.

In its first year, the CJTs resolved over 150 cases without any recidivism and with the full cooperation of all parties in two of the most difficult neighborhoods of Monrovia.

At the individual level, these efforts save citizens time and money. The project is small, but for a total

investment of around \$4,000, the Lab estimates that the CJTs have saved citizens more than \$9,000 in bond, administrative, and travel fees, and approximately 350 days of time that they otherwise would have spent navigating a confusing court system. This has allowed them to focus on what is important in their lives - like earning money to feed their family and educating their children.

At the community level, these efforts have brought the people of West Point and Logan Town together, building a sense of community around a shared awareness of their rights and responsibilities; and of the role that law plays in their lives.

At the institutional level, the project has empowered grassroots legal advocates to resolve disputes informally, while also supporting the formal justice system. The informal bonds across institutions proved critical in West Point during the Ebola outbreak, when the army violently enforced a quarantine in the community. The CJT team in West Point was chosen as a key point of contact for collaboration with the government and international donors during crisis. Citizen grievances were handled and a stand-off eventually resolved. Since then the CJTs have mediated over 70 additional Ebola related disputes, on issues ranging from allocation of ration cards to the care of orphans.



Mediation in progress in the Logan Town Community Justice Team office in West Point, Monrovia. Photograph by Morgana Wingard.

Key Lessons

- 1 It is essential to listen carefully and spend significant time in any community before beginning work. This provides the opportunity to truly understand conceptions of justice, build trust and identify key individuals with whom to work. We spent almost a year in West Point listening and engaging in conversations before beginning any work on the project, and that proved critical over time. This allows any rule of law initiative to design for context and avoid past mistakes. Other mediation efforts had taken place in West Point but only during weekday daylight hours-most disputes occur in the evenings and on the weekends-so our CJTs are available 24/7.
- 2 It is important to embrace potential failure and pivot when the project may not be producing the desired results. The CJTs grew from the communities themselves, but the mediators had difficulty in explaining the need for them to the larger neighbourhood. Initially, few people were using the service. However, we developed a communication strategy that provided a basic understanding of what CJTs do, in a way that fitted local context. The best way to communicate our services was to employ a respected town crier in the community. We also deepened the sophistication of our approach to emphasize outreach through community radio programs.
- 3 Sustainability is key to ensure enduring results and move away from dependence on external sources of funding. From the outset, the program was designed with a long-term horizon in mind in terms of both financial and organizational sustainability. After our initial investment of funds, each of the CJTs is now in the process of raising their own revenue from communities to continue their services. A recent community meeting in Logan Town led to spontaneous pledges of over \$10,000 Liberian dollars. Secondly, we have supported the CJTs to build the systems and teams necessary to operate on a low-cost basis over time - through significant amounts of training, mentoring and support, all sourced within Liberia.
- 4 The progress made and the networks of the CJTs has ensured financial support from the Ministry of Internal Affairs which is a first step towards collaboration with the government and coordination with the larger formal justice system over time. Discussions are now ongoing with the Ministry of Justice and the Justice and Peace Commission on how sustainability of the CJTs can be assured and expanded to additional communities going forwards.