



LIBERIA: Does Giving People the Chance to Work Reduce Conflict and Boost Peace?

Nearly one billion people will enter the labor force between now and 2030—the deadline that World Bank President Jim Kim set for ending extreme poverty. Helping

young adults find productive work and giving them the tools they need to succeed is crucial to meeting this goal. But what happens when the young adults are mainly

skilled in armed conflict and illegal money-making activities and the countries where they live have devastated economies and few work opportunities? Development experts and policymakers are exploring options for improving employment opportunities through programs that can boost job earnings while also reducing the likelihood of social instability.

In Liberia, where civil wars were fought on and off between 1989 and 2003, the non-profit organization, Action on Armed Violence, the Government of Liberia,

and the United Nations developed an innovative program to help ex-combatants move into full-time farm work by giving them training, counseling, and start-up capital. The World Bank, which is committed to helping countries improve work opportunities as part of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, helped support a randomized impact evaluation of the program. The evaluation was carried out by researchers with Innovations for Poverty Action.

The evaluation found that the program successfully shifted high-risk men from criminal activities into farming. Graduates earned more money than their counterparts who weren't enrolled in the program, spent less time in illegal work and were less likely to consider fighting as mercenaries in neighboring conflicts. The evaluation also showed that skills training isn't always enough—men who received training but didn't get their start-up capital didn't do as well as those who did. As policy makers in the region look to strengthen their economies and boost stability, the results of this evaluation offer guidelines for crafting successful programs.



Context

By the end of the civil war in 2003, the majority of Liberia's three million citizens were displaced and the country had been devastated. People were poor and, after so

many years of war, often had little, if any, schooling. Although the security situation slowly improved and the economy expanded, by 2008 there were still close to 10,000 ex-fighters living in remote, ungoverned parts of the country. They earned money through illegal activities such as unlicensed mining and rubber tapping.

Action on Armed Violence, a non-profit based in Britain, wanted to see whether it was possible to shift former combatants from illegal work to steady agricultural labor, the main source of income for most rural Liberians. There was also the hope that the program,

Participant Profile:

- On average, 30 years old
- 27 percent were literate
- 71 percent lived with their spouse
- Monthly cash earnings (before program) of \$47
- \$46 in savings
- \$7 in debts
- 47 percent spent some time in potentially illicit work
- 33 percent said this was their main source of income

implemented in cooperation with the government's Ministry of Agriculture, would reduce the likelihood of ex-fighters returning to combat by giving them legal and sustainable work. An impact evaluation, supported

by the World Bank's Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund, the Italian Children and Youth Trust Fund, and the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, was built into the program to measure the effect.

Evaluation

Between May and October 2009, Action on Armed Violence recruited applicants from 138 communities with high concentrations of ex-combatants. The program had a limited number of slots, making it possible for researchers to create a control group among those who couldn't be accommodated despite qualifying. In total, 1,123 men were enrolled in the study, with 640 men randomly assigned to be in the treatment group. A small number of high-ranking officers were enrolled—it was considered risky to leave them out of the program—but they were not counted for the study.

Men in the treatment group were placed in one of two residential programs: Bong County in western Liberia or Sinoe County in eastern Liberia. They received four months of agricultural training centered on growing rice and vegetables and animal husbandry, in addition to basic literacy classes. A built-in "life skills" class sought to teach participants non-violent approaches to conflict. Former combatants who had trained as mentors provided conflict management sessions, as well as more informal counseling. When the program finished, participants received about \$125 worth of start-up agricultural materials—seeds and tools to those men wanting to specialize in crops, and animals and building materials for those wanting to specialize in pig or poultry raising. Some of the materials were given at the end of the pro-

gram, and the other half after they had started farming. An unexpected supply issue related to the start-up capital provided to participants created an important variation between the groups. Those who focused on animal husbandry received training, but didn't receive the promised pigs and chickens by the endline survey. Instead, they were promised an equivalent cash transfer (about \$100), which was supposed to be transferred within a few months after the survey. Participants who specialized in crop farming received the training and got their promised start-up seeds and other materials in time. As there were almost no observable differences between the two groups at baseline, this provided an opportunity to evaluate the effect of providing start-up capital and training versus providing training alone. In other words, researchers were able to also conduct an additional "as-if" random evaluation.

A baseline survey was conducted between May and October 2009. The endline survey was conducted from February to June 2011, 18 months after baseline and 14 months after training was finished. The qualitative evaluation included extensive conversations with participants and all the information was self-reported. More than 90 percent of participants in both control and treatment groups were available for the endline survey.

The Findings

Men who attended the program spent more time farming and...

More than a year after completing the program, participants were 14.1 percentage points more likely to have farmed the previous season, up from 69 percent for the

control group. They were 15.5 percentage points more likely to be currently farming, up from 61 percent for the control group. Participants in the program were also 35 percentage points more likely to grow their own seedlings and 12 percentage points more likely to have sold crops.

... fewer hours every month engaged in potentially illegal activities.

Participation in the program didn't end illicit activities completely—around 37 percent of men still engaged in such activities, a small decline compared with the control group. Nor did it lead to any change in the overall number of hours worked in the previous month. However, men who had gone through the program were spending 33 percent more of their time farming and 24 percent less in potentially illicit work, such as rubber tapping or unlicensed gold and diamond mining. In short, men shifted their portfolio of activities from illegal to legal ones.

They also showed less interest in being recruited as mercenaries.

An impetus for the program was to reduce the likelihood that ex-combatants would return to fighting, whether in Liberia or as mercenaries in a neighboring country. When the civil war ended in 2003, the United Nations ran a traditional Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program, giving cash and training vouchers to former fighters. However the lack of legal opportunities limited the impact and when the program ended in July 2009, thousands of former fighters still lived in remote areas, involved in illegal or unlicensed work.

Action on Armed Violence hoped that a more directed program, and one that specifically trained men to enter the country's dominant agricultural sector, would reduce the chances of criminal or armed activities. In fact, participants reported less interest in joining the war that broke out in neighboring Cote d'Ivoire in December 2010. They were 43 percent less likely to attend a secret recruitment meeting and 51 percent less likely to consider joining, even at a going recruitment rate of \$1,000.

Ensuring that program participants received the agricultural supplies they were promised turned out to be important to success.

The shift from illegal resource extraction to farming was concentrated among the young men who specialized in

crop raising and therefore received their capital. Hours of agricultural work did not increase among men who trained to become animal specialists. Start-up capital therefore appeared to be crucial to the men's ability to successfully shift into new occupations.

But the program didn't appear to reduce aggressive behavior or violence.

The program included a life skills component and counseling intended to help participants curb aggressive behavior, such as physical fights and destroying property,



and also taught methods of non-violent conflict resolution. The study showed no effect of the program on these behaviors, however, suggesting that the life skills component was not sufficient to change behavior, and that the economic incentives alone likely led to the shift away from illicit and mercenary work. One possibility is that behavior was changed in a temporary and artificial environment, and may not have survived the transition to a new village life.

Nor did the program affect existing chains of command and ex-combatant relationships.

The researchers hoped that relocating ex-combatants to a new village for training would encourage them to sever ties with their former commanders, but the program didn't seem to break down existing chains of military command. The men in the pro-



gram continued to socialize with other ex-combatants, but that was also because of the program’s design: The residential component of the program meant that participants spent all of their time with other high-risk men. This implies that the reduction in mercenary activity likely arose from the economic incentives alone rather than by disconnecting men from risky social networks. A program that included more non-

combatants and fewer ranking officers could potentially also break armed group linkages and further deter mercenary activity.

The program seems to make economic sense when the higher incomes are factored in.

Assuming a permanent income boost of almost \$11 a month, the per person program cost of \$1,275 would be paid back in nine years. This doesn’t take into account national economic gains from a drop in illicit activity, in addition to the potentially stabilizing effect in the country and in neighboring countries from a lack of steady recruits for mercenary work.

Conclusion

In post-conflict countries, work training programs have the potential to help rebuild a shattered economy, provide job opportunities, and boost peace-building efforts. Indeed, as this impact evaluation shows, training and access to capital does help young people shift away from illegal activities into legal, non-violent, and productive work. This should be welcome news for policy makers in post-conflict regions looking to rebuild the economies—and social fabric—of their countries.

But the findings also shed light on some of the constraints that youth face when trying to pursue work opportunities: Training alone may not be enough if it isn’t supplemented with start-up capital. These findings will likely help development experts as they continue to create programs that help the millions of young people entering the labor force find meaningful and productive work.

The Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund, part of the World Bank Group, supports and disseminates research evaluating the impact of development projects to help alleviate poverty. **The goal is to collect and build empirical evidence that can help governments and development organizations design and implement the most appropriate and effective policies for better educational, health and job opportunities for people in developing countries.** For more information about who we are and what we do, go to: <http://www.worldbank.org/sief>.
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