



USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project



SHORT-TERM SKILLS TRAINING AND ABE PROGRAMS: A SOAP MAKING CASE STUDY

ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION LEARNING SERIES

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The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project provides increased access to quality alternative basic education (ABE) classes, social and leadership development opportunities, and livelihoods skills training for out-of-school youth, ages 13 to 35, with marginal literacy and numeracy skills. Project activities support the continued growth of economic opportunity through work-based learning and an emphasis on clubs and local alliances to support education and livelihood development of youth. The Advancing Youth Learning Agenda focuses on research questions that have arisen during project implementation, enabling the exploration of the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership, and livelihoods model.

INTRODUCTION

Advancing Youth is dedicated to improving Liberian youths' education, leadership, and livelihoods capabilities. This integrated approach to ABE provides older youth and young adults with the skills they need in their daily lives. Short-term skills training is seen to provide youth with an income-generating activity that can help them earn money for daily needs and, hopefully, increase retention in ABE classes. To learn the extent to which provision of short-term skills training achieves this, Advancing Youth conducted a study that sought to answer the following research question:

How does short-term skills training provide an effective bridge for youth to take advantage of market opportunities?

BACKGROUND

The USAID Advancing Youth Project (Advancing Youth) has implemented short-term skills training to youth registered in ABE classes in skills such as soap making, food preservation, basket weaving, and beekeeping. Soap making was the most recent short-term skills training provided and was originally identified as a strong market niche because it is a product everyone uses or needs, has low capital investment, and does not spoil easily. It became an even more advantageous product during the Ebola crisis when hand washing took on increased importance.

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The project provided soap-making training twice during the course of the project. The second round of soap-making training improved on the original curriculum by adding aspects of starting and managing a business and marketing. To address the research question of how skills training could provide a bridge to market opportunities, the soap-making training that integrated business aspects was the one chosen for the study. Training was provided to peer training innovators (PTIs)—learners from ABE sites who received master training and then returned to their sites to train their peer learners to make two types of soap. Between December 2015 and March 2016, PTIs completed in-school training for ABE learners at 146 ABE sites.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH LIVELIHOODS SKILLS TRAINING

In the literature reviewed on youth skills development in Africa, a primary focus has been on providing vocational and technical education for workforce development and for higher levels of education. This research has not focused on skills development in informal or alternative education sectors. Given the scarcity of job opportunities in the Liberian formal sector and employers' reluctance to invest in skills training, particularly where literacy rates are low, international donors believe that creating informal and semi-formal livelihood opportunities for young people is important for supporting the economic development of youth. For example, USAID and other donor agencies have begun to focus increasingly on supplementing traditional workforce development strategies that focus more on formal employment with livelihoods development strategies that focus more on the informal job sector, especially for young people aged 15–24 years who are from marginalized backgrounds (James-Wilson, D. 2008). Further, other researchers contend that programs that strengthen livelihoods reflect and seek to fulfill both material and experiential needs in the youth population (Kabir, Hou, Akther, Wang, & Wang, 2012).

STUDY DESIGN AND DATA LIMITATIONS

To pursue the research question, a non-experimental study using a quantitative survey was conducted to ascertain how many trained learners have gone on to pursue a soap-making livelihood after receiving training, and how that has created a bridge to improved livelihoods opportunities for youth. The survey targeted 450 randomly selected youth at 45 randomly selected ABE sites. Due to the availability of respondents at the time of the survey, 205 females and 120 males were surveyed (for a total sample of 325). A minimum of 352 respondents was needed to observe a moderately small and significant difference between outcomes for males and females. Due to the small sample size, even when differences did exist in reality, our study may not have picked up on these differences as being significant. As the survey was given to learners trained using a specific curriculum, findings may not be generalizable to all short-term skills training. The survey also only recorded data for four production cycles of soap, but many learners stated they had made soap more than four times. So, a formula was used to estimate the income generated by learners from soap making after the training, but it may not provide a true picture of the income earned from soap making.



A participant demonstrates the soap making process.

County	Female	Male	Total
Bong	41	26	67
Grand Bassa	40	31	71
Lofa	37	24	62
Montserrado	38	14	52
Nimba	49	25	74
Grand Total	205	120	325

Figure 1: Survey respondents.

KEY FINDINGS

Following the in-school training conducted by PTIs, 321 of the 325 learners surveyed stated that they sold the soap they made during the training. When asked how they used the money they earned from the soap sales, the answers were as follows:

- 63% said they re-invested it in their soap-making business.
- 46% said they used part of their income for the youth club.
- 18% said they used some of their income for personal savings.

Of those who sold the soap after the initial training, 81% (264 of 325 surveyed) went on to make more soap. Of those 264, 94% were able to sell again, representing 76% of the original sample of 325 surveyed.

After the initial training, 79% of those who continued to make and sell soap did so in groups that had an average of 13 members. Groups made soap an average of 3 times after the training, and individuals made soap an average of 4.6 times, although in smaller batches. Interestingly, groups were not much more productive than individuals and yet had to distribute their revenue, resulting in less income per group member than individuals received:

- Individuals generated an average of US\$32 in income for every production cycle of palm oil soap and an average of US\$19 for red oil soap.
- Groups generated an average of US\$52 in income for every production cycle of palm oil soap and an average of US\$33 for red oil soap.

A formula was used to estimate the total income over time from soap sales and how much each member of the groups would make if the income were distributed evenly. The formula yielded these results for the survey period:

- For palm oil soap: Groups made US\$23 per member (US\$170 as a group) versus US\$128 per individual.
- For red oil soap: Groups made US\$13 per member (US\$112 as a group) versus US\$118 per individual.

When comparing the survey responses from women versus men respondents (see Figure 2):

- Women appear to have made palm oil and red oil soap twice as frequently as men.
- Women sold both types of soap at a better rate than men, with the difference being greater for palm oil soap.

Income Factors (Average)	Palm Oil Soap Production		Red Oil Soap Production	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Production cycles	5.6	2.8	5.6	2.8
Soap units produced per cycle	76	85	177	134
Soap selling rate	0.96	0.86	0.89	0.81
Soap price (in Liberian dollars)*	19.6	19.6	19.7	19.3

* 1 Liberian Dollar equals 0.011 US Dollar.

Figure 2: Comparison of survey responses from female and male participants producing palm oil and red oil soaps.

About two thirds (66%) of those in groups said they spent their revenue on more soap-making materials, mostly raw ingredients (95%) but also equipment (20%) and tools (15%). In addition, 20% of group respondents said they also put some of their revenue into savings. A much smaller proportion of individuals (30%) re-invested funds in their soap-making businesses. In stark contrast to their group counterparts, about 68% of individuals said they saved some of their revenue. See Figure 3.

When asked whether the training they received was helpful for learning to make or sell soap, respondents were nearly unanimous (99%) in saying the training was either helpful or very helpful. In addition, 70% of respondents answered that they felt the PTI was “very qualified.”

Financial Behavior	Female	Male
Savings	66%	73%
Daily life expenses	55%	67%
Investing in soap business	32%	27%
School fees for children	26%	7%
Investing in another business	11%	0%

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents indicating that they engaged in a particular financial behavior.



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RECOMMENDATIONS

The data reported by learners indicate that soap making provided income-generating opportunities that helped them not only to save more money and pay for daily expenses, but also to invest in business opportunities. The use of learners as PTIs provided training in a cost-effective and timely manner. Based on the experience with this and other short-term skills training, Advancing Youth recommends the following:

- 1) Integrating a fee-for-service model into PTI training, for use after the initial peer-trainings have been conducted, could help ensure PTIs continue to be a community resource.
- 2) A PTI-like approach, maybe using older students to teach younger students, could also be useful for the Ministry of Education in integrating skills training as vocational learning into curricula for grades 1–12, as outlined in the 2016–2017 academic calendar.
- 3) Integrating opportunities for learners to expand knowledge in such areas as business management and group/collective business formation could help youth perform more effectively and efficiently in whatever mode (group or individual) they choose to operate.
- 4) ABE service providers should seriously consider integrating short-term skills training into their programs. The application of skills such as calculating numbers, measuring ingredients, and reading labels provide invaluable experience for learners to further develop and apply literacy and numeracy skills in a real-world context.
- 5) Future skills training interventions should build in the ability to conduct longitudinal assessments to better assess the impact of skills training on learner incomes and standards of living.
- 6) To further build youth business skills, youth should be involved in the initial analysis of market opportunities when identifying skills training for youth development.

References

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USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project’s Alternative Basic Education Learning Series features select studies in the Learning Agenda—a set of research questions that have arisen during project implementation. The studies explore the effectiveness and sustainability of the integrated learning, leadership and livelihoods model.