COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
IN ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION

ALTERNATIVE BASIC EDUCATION LEARNING SERIES

OCTOBER 2016, ISSUE 6

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.

INTRODUCTION

The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project's sustainable, integrated approach to youth development requires active networking, coordination, and collaboration among ABE sites, ABE community engagement groups, and their communities. To better understand how ABE community engagement groups support and facilitate their ABE sites, the Advancing Youth Project explored the following question:

> **What are factors that contribute to effective community engagement in ABE?**

To answer this question, this study was designed to increase the understanding of what works in engaging local stakeholders in efforts to maintain and sustain quality ABE programs for their communities. The three organizational approaches to community engagement investigated were (1) the National Adult Education Association of Liberia (NEAEL), (2) the Liberian Youth Network (LIYONET), and (3) the USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

ABE engagement groups—NAEAL's Literacy Management Committees, LIYONET's Learner Retention Committees, and Advancing Youth's ABE Committees—are enthused about keeping their ABE sites moving forward.[1] The membership of the ABE engagement groups is voluntary, drawing from community residents holding traditional and local leadership positions. To

[1] ABE engagement groups is the general term that encompasses NAEAL's Literacy Management Committees, LIYONET's Learner Retention Committees, and Advancing Youth's ABE Committees.

ABE activities need strong community support for success and sustainability. Even more critically these endeavors must be owned by their respective communities. With direct community support and engagement for ABE activities, effective implementation and successful outcomes are significantly more likely to be achieved.

date, these volunteers have relied on personal motivation, community participation, and learner involvement to sustain their ABE sites. However, in discussions with all three ABE engagement groups, they repeatedly mentioned the need for additional institutional support to keep their communities engaged in ABE in the future. Specifically, the groups needed additional tools and incentives (i.e., site funding, capacity training, livelihood skill supplies), as well as increased support from the Ministry of Education and other Liberian institutions to ensure they are enduring components of the Liberian education landscape. It is this future commitment that ABE engagement groups feel has the most potential.

METHODOLOGY

This non-experimental study used a mixed-methods approach to learn how ABE engagement groups support learners and related activities in ABE programs. This mixed approach included gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to identify

practices and methods that support successful approaches to community engagement. The findings of this study were then organized around the six attributes of successful community engagement: (1) trust/relationship-building, (2) community-driven endeavors, (3) cooperation with the government, (4) capacity development, (5) reduction in barriers to participation, and (6) long-term process orientation (Sandmann, 2006; Tamarack, 2002).

KEY FINDINGS

National Adult Education Association of Liberia (NAEAL)

Number of Advancing Youth-Supported Sites, 2015–2016

NAEAL engages the community at each of its sites through a **Literacy Management Committee (LMC),** with the goal of putting control of the learning site in the hands of the community members. For NAEAL, effective support of ABE programming must come from the community itself. Although

NAEAL supports LMCs in their development of goals and initiatives, they deem it critical that the goals are for that specific community and are developed by the community members themselves. The LMC must be accountable to both its community, to ensure that the needs of its ABE site are being met, and to the ABE learners themselves. In an effort to promote individual accountability and responsibility, NAEAL provides the sites with the curriculum, but all other choices, including the exact composition of the LMC itself, must be made by the specific LMCs. NAEAL doesn't dictate a singular approach to its LMCs.

Another major success factor for NAEAL is the LMC's capacity to develop strategies to build the relationship between the school and the local community. The goal of strengthening this relationship is to encourage community involvement in the operation of the school, as well as to mobilize community resources. Effective relations between the LMC and the community are predicated on the concepts of clear communication, transparency, and accountability. NAEAL believes that transparency and accountability are the core values to securing broader community confidence in the partnership between itself and the community collective. As it asserts in its publication, "integrity and high ethical standards" must be the hallmarks of its operations.

LMC accountability is assessed through its practices of building awareness of adult education and making it possible for the most vulnerable illiterate community members to have access to organized learning opportunities. NAEAL
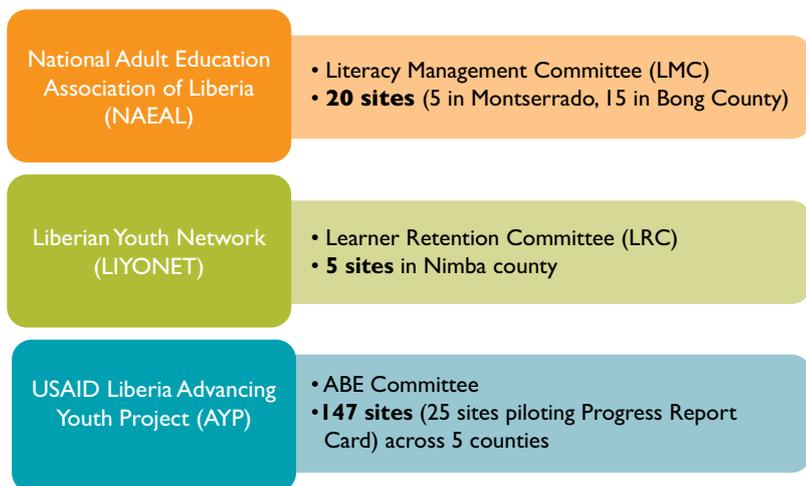

National Adult Education Association of Liberia (NAEAL)	• Literacy Management Committee (LMC) • **20 sites** (5 in Montserrado, 15 in Bong County)
Liberian Youth Network (LIYONET)	• Learner Retention Committee (LRC) • **5 sites** in Nimba county
USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project (AYP)	• ABE Committee • **147 sites** (25 sites piloting Progress Report Card) across 5 counties

Figure 1: Community structures of AYP-supported programs, 2015–2016

therefore encourages the LMCs to be accountable in diverse ways, such as through learner assessments and continual data gathering on aspects of the engagement strategies.

Liberian Youth Network (LIYONET)

The key objective of LIYONET is to create the conditions and provide the support necessary for its ABE sites to become self-sustaining, thereby ensuring the persistence of the program over the long haul. LIYONET builds the capacity of its Learner Retention Committees (LRCs) through capacity training that in turn helps the ABE sites develop this self-sufficiency. LIYONET programs are located in rural areas, making it even more important that there is strong support for ABE classes, which help learners develop skills that are otherwise not available to them.

LIYONET's LRC model utilizes planned feedback and assessment mechanisms (Reflect, Connect, Apply) to shape and support community engagement. LIYONET's community engagement model depends on the facilitators and site administrators producing written reports for the LRCs so that they are better informed and able to respond to pressing challenges at the ABE site during the LMC's monthly meetings. The continuous feedback loop ensures that all parties remain active in the ABE site. In addition to these LRC meetings, LIYONET also implements monthly stakeholder meetings to discuss learner retention and project sustainability with the broader community. These meetings are particularly productive because they demonstrate to the LRCs LIYONET's commitment to their communities and to their learners. LIYONET staff feel these stakeholder meetings are responsible for the improved LRC performance as related to learner retention.

By providing structured support, LIYONET positions its LRCs to focus on local community issues instead of broader foundational or institutional

concerns. It also demonstrates that proactive community investment to address areas of a need is an example of meaningful collaboration.

USAID Advancing Youth

The USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project established **ABE Committees** to serve as the forum for coordination with the Ministry of Education, members of the community, and other partners for discussing and providing assistance and support to learning centers. The executive board officers on an ABE Committee are elected to a two-year term by the community. Advancing Youth reinforced the connection between the ABE Committees and their sites by having the ABE site administrators serve as the ex officio secretaries of the committees. The overall responsibility of an ABE Committee is for recruitment and retention of ABE learners in the center. To fulfill their mandate, ABE Committees need institutional, communal, and financial support from their neighbors.

Demonstrating the capacity-building potential of ABE has been integral to recruiting and retaining learners. The ABE Committees interviewed keenly understood the transformational potential of education, and they were dedicated to transforming the members of their own communities. But, beyond their own communities, the committees felt that the potential cumulative gains of ABE in advancing Liberia's youth could also improve the socioeconomic outlook for all Liberians.

According to study participants, ABE sites need even more dedication from their respective communities to ensure that ABE programs persist after Advancing Youth support ends. The ABE learning centers need to be community-driven endeavors. The community needs to "own" the ABE program. Advancing Youth developed the **Community Site Improvement Cycle** to improve participation of the local community in their learning center and to increase the quality of the learning center.

Figure 2: Steps in the Community Site Improvement Cycle

The **Progress Report Card (PRC)** was introduced for use by the ABE Committees as a community engagement tool that would increase accountability and participation at the learning center. The PRC is a tool for committees to work with their communities to set goals for the learning center, develop plans for making improvements, and track the quality of the ABE learning center.

CONCLUDING IMPLICATIONS

ABE activities need strong community support for success and sustainability. Even more critical, these endeavors must be owned by their respective communities. Without direct community support and engagement for ABE activities, effective implementation and successful outcomes are significantly less likely to be achieved. Community-based support ensures that individual communities are invested in the advancement of their ABE learners and ABE sites. Engaging the community expands the capacity of ABE programs in both the short term and long term.

The following findings have been informed by the three case studies and the PRC pilot:

1) Community ownership of ABE sites is integral to their sustainability. All three ABE engagement groups—NAEAL's Literacy Management Committee, LIYONET 's Student Retention

Committee, and USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project's ABE Committee—stressed the need for local community engagement and involvement in their activities. Further, community ABE engagement groups need to have both local autonomy and strong partnership with an NGO and/or local government partners so they are better equipped to interface with their neighbors, colleagues, and community leaders. Unless ABE sites are understood as extensions of the very community itself, they cannot succeed.

2) Capacity building is a fundamental component of successful ABE community engagement. Each of the three case studies stressed the importance of capacity building—in management, leadership, and grant writing—for their ABE engagement group. Capacity development is important for the sustainability of the ABE engagement groups specifically and of the site in general. In addition, these trainings also reinforce the importance of the NGO implementing partner to the ABE site. Providing committees with regular training, materials (e.g., notebooks and textbooks), and onsite monitoring will help to strengthen individual and community involvement on behalf of the ABE site.

3) Community engagement groups, such as Advancing Youth's ABE Committees, need regular interaction with their broader communities. Stakeholder meetings help the community to foster a deeper connection with the ABE site and set goals for both the ABE engagement groups and the site as a whole. These regular interactions also provide an ideal format for sharing monitoring and evaluation findings of the ABE site. These meetings enable committees to tell their own stories and make their work visible in communities.

4) Identifying and using tools to ensure accountability by all involved parties provides data for self-assessment and growth. Mechanisms of accountability must exist at all levels inclusive of the implementing sponsor/agency. Processes, such as the Reflect, Connect, Act procedure employed by LIYONET and the Progress Report Card piloted by Advancing Youth, offer lessons in documenting activities and accountability.

The fulfillment of ABE's potential is predicated on it becoming an integrated component of Liberia's educational offerings. ABE engagement groups have an essential role to play in monitoring the effectiveness and relevance of ABE programs, and they can make a significant contribution to the decentralized implementation and management of ABE activities.

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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.