

COUNTY ALLIANCES:

COORDINATING LOCAL YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

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 a wide range of government, nongovernment, and private sector players. To support this coordination and collaboration, Advancing Youth initiated County Alliances: county-wide alliances of key local stakeholders invested in the education and skills development of young people. Through the Learning Agenda, Advancing Youth documented the start-up and functioning of these youth-oriented coordination mechanisms to assess the future viability of the model. This coordination mechanism study was shaped by the following research question:

What structures, functions and activities have enabled Advancing Youth County Alliances to advocate for and provide integrated livelihood, education and leadership opportunities for youth?

This study examines and analyzes selected County Alliances to assess how these networks advance youth development and enrichment locally, with a specific focus on the factors and characteristics that support sustainable efforts. Further, the study assesses how inter-organizational cooperation mechanisms, persistent knowledge sharing, and a focused long-term strategy are utilized in the County Alliances.

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Main Findings: Although their focuses are distinct, the Alliances have developed similar core coordinating competencies. Grand Bassa and Bong's Alliances have equally emphasized the need for a continual open dialogue and communication within the Alliance network. By limiting their current efforts to a single aspect of youth development, informed by a network-determined agenda, each Alliance has increased its likelihood for success as a coordination mechanism.

BACKGROUND

USAID Liberia Advancing Youth Project initiated County Alliances to build a network for creating learning, leadership and livelihood opportunities for youth and for connecting youth with those opportunities. County Alliances are therefore viewed as a long-term structure for advocacy and leadership in youth development. The overall purpose of the Alliances is to bring together various stakeholders involved in youth education and livelihoods preparation, share information and responsibilities, and contribute to the success and sustainability of youth-serving programs. The County Alliances function as independent entities that focus on youth issues cutting across multiple sectors and interests. By creating the County Alliances, Advancing Youth hoped that each Alliance would be able to utilize the capacities and resources of its own membership to improve the situation of its county's youth.

METHODOLOGY

Using a non-experimental qualitative case study approach, which included meeting observations, document reviews, and focus group discussions, this study assessed the structure, accomplishments, and sustainability of

the Alliances in Grand Bassa and Bong counties.

The **Grand Bassa Advancing Youth Alliance (GBAYA)** and the **Bong Advancing Youth Alliance (BAYA)** were selected from a pool of five Advancing Youth County Alliances (Bong, Grand Bassa, Lofa, Montserrado, and Nimba) using criteria focused on their development, current status and results. These alliances were further along in their revitalization after the Ebola crisis than the other three Advancing Youth County Alliances.

KEY FINDINGS

Determining how to unite separate entities into a single cohesive force is the crux of any coordination mechanism. Both GBAYA and BAYA have developed a structure for their Alliances, defined a common agenda at the vision and mission level, established leadership structures, and proposed legal frameworks—such as drafting a constitution and terms of reference—in order to define the shape, function, and objectives of the County Alliances. These institutional development activities will delineate the roles and responsibilities of its organizational membership.

Similarly, GBAYA and BAYA share a common approach to coordinating youth enrichment. Both entities operate as youth-oriented coordination mechanisms developed to improve the situation of youth in their respective counties. Both Alliances equally emphasize the need for a continual open dialogue and communication within the Alliance network, and both Alliances stress the importance of collective action and strong cooperative coordination. Dedicated leadership is also important to both groups, but all decisions come from their respective general assemblies.

While both institutions were started by Advancing Youth, their current formation and focus are quite different from one another. Further, they approach the issue of county-level youth development from two discrete perspectives.

Grand Bassa Advancing Youth Alliance (GBAYA)

GBAYA chose to focus on livelihood skills development. The Alliance is built upon the recognition that the vulnerability of youth may lead them to engage in destructive behaviors because they feel economically and socially neglected. Understanding the vulnerable position of Grand Bassa County's youth, the Alliance felt livelihoods development promised the most immediate returns and advances for the county's youth. The overarching goal of the Alliance remained the same: to change the attitude among youth from "give me" to "I can do it myself." GBAYA plans to implement a needs assessment to better understand the specific livelihoods needs of Grand Bassa youth.

The overarching goal of the Grand Bassa Advancing Youth Alliance remains changing the attitudes among youth from "give me" to "I can do it myself."

To build youth's self-sufficiency and self-reliance, GBAYA invested in skills training for local youth. GBAYA's effectiveness as a county-level coordination mechanism is predicated on its ability to provide the needed livelihoods training and job opportunities to Grand Bassa's youth population. One of GBAYA's most promising accomplishments is its successful linkage with Mercy Corps, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO). As part of GBAYA, Mercy Corps agreed to involve local youth in youth training courses in work readiness. The Alliance hopes their collaboration with Mercy Corps will be the first of many with locally involved NGOs on behalf of Grand Bassa's youth. In addition, GBAYA has plans to work with local businesses to implement an internship program for youth. In particular, GBAYA hopes to implement a cadet system, which would recruit two to three youths at a time to work with the GBAYA. This internship would be a way to help youth match their skills with employers' needs and develop a work history.

GBAYA and its members want to leave a legacy of having worked to change the circumstances for youth in Grand Bassa county. This is the driving force of the group. As a coordination mechanism, the collective desire to work together and effect change propels the group forward. This dedication and commitment to social change and exchange underlies the true goal of GBAYA: **"Tomorrow we need to know we leave a legacy."**



Bong Advancing Youth Alliance (BAYA)

While GBAYA's strategy is outward-facing, BAYA's strategy is more inward-facing, concentrating on sustaining ABE activities in the county while building the institutional and financial capacity of the network. BAYA's capacity to support ABE programs requires that it improve its institutional strength. Consequently, an integral component of its network activities is building the capacity of BAYA members, which BAYA believes will increase both the utility and efficacy of the institution in the long run. BAYA is determined to pass on to its entire membership any capacity-building programs, exercises, or trainings that Advancing Youth has provided.

These inward-facing initiatives are predicated on the concept that a stronger institutional body will be better prepared to help Bong County youth in the long term. As evidence of their commitment to the Alliance, the membership decided that the only way to move forward institutionally was to implement monthly dues of

five dollars (US) for all members. The monthly dues payment is important to the Alliance because it denotes the membership's financial abilities and commitment. The membership voted to use part of the dues to pay for an office because it signified the sincerity and stability of BAYA activities.

BAYA believes developing their institutional capacity will improve its capability to supporting the long-term sustainability of ABE sites. However, the Alliance understands that the collection of member dues alone will not facilitate the continuation of Bong's ABE sites. BAYA is planning a promotional campaign to publicize Advancing Youth's departure as a means to seek out new NGO partners who could help offset the cost of Bong's ABE activities. The Alliance already has a relationship with the international NGO Save the Children, which has donated materials to BAYA in the past.

BAYA knows that ABE education continues to expand the opportunities and possibilities available to Liberian youth. BAYA's focus on ABE programs

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—Member of the BAYA Secretariat



is motivated by its personal connection with the youth of Liberia. According to one member of the secretariat “the youth are our children, Liberia is our home, it is our responsibility to make Liberia a better home for all of us, [it is] our responsibility to make Liberia a better place.” Improving the prospects of Liberian youth is a positive step in making Liberia a better place for everyone to live.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study makes the following recommendations for creating an active, inter-organizational cooperation mechanism that pursues a long term, county-based strategy for youth development:

1. Multi-sector networks, such as the County Alliances, should continue to promote a common focus among its members while also nurturing their institutional relationships. The Alliances need to continue to operationalize their mission, vision, by-laws, and other governance mechanisms so they become the ground rules and practices for their collective behavior. Alliances need to create protocols that hold both the individual member institutions and the entire Alliance network responsible for specific youth-enrichment goals and agendas. Only by establishing a mutually beneficial system that advances the agendas of both individual institutions and the entire network will the Alliance unify individual institutions into a cohesive partnership.
2. The performance of the Alliances will require intentional capacity building within the network in the areas of developing systems of management and accountability; defining and measuring success; and gathering, organizing and interpreting information, such as market research and innovations in youth development.
3. Each Alliance will need a resource mobilization strategy that enables it to fund basic activities such as needs assessments, monitoring effectiveness of alliance in networking, referral and advocacy, developing management and measurement systems, maintaining office space, producing advocacy campaigns, and other collaborative functions. Capitalizing on the institutional capabilities of their member organizations and external funding proposals can help facilitate specific projects and agendas but cannot be relied on for all of the Alliance’s resource requirements.
4. In addition to internal system and resource mobilization, Alliances also need to continue their initiatives on behalf of Liberia’s youth in their counties. Part of expanding their agendas will be a concerted effort to publicize the mandate, offerings, and needs of the Alliances to the broader community. Taken cumulatively, these initiatives will continue to develop the County Alliances’ advocacy, referral, and implementation programs.

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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.

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