



Key Lessons from Evaluations of Humanitarian Action in Liberia

‘If only we’d known this before we started...’

How many times do we as humanitarians have to re-invent the wheel?
How often are we unaware of previous lessons learnt, often communicated through evaluations of humanitarian action?

This short briefing distils key lessons and examples of good practice from past experiences in Liberia. It is based on seven evaluative reports available from the ALNAP’s Evaluative Reports Database.

Cross-cutting Findings

Broadly speaking, the biggest problem in meeting humanitarian and rehabilitation needs and delivering appropriate programmes stems more from organisational and management issues rather than lack of coherent policies. Notwithstanding, the effective dissemination of policy and ‘operationalisation’ guidelines is the first step toward effective implementation in any post-conflict setting.

Lessons learned and good practice relate to four such organisational and management issues. While these are by no means exhaustive, they represent the key areas covered in the evaluative reports on which this briefing is based:

1. Programme planning and design
2. Programme delivery
3. Staffing
4. The relationship with implementing partners

1. Programme Planning and Design

Lesson 1: Ensure clear objectives and indicators

As programmes are increasingly assessed on longer term impact (eg, livelihood recovery of local populations and psychological well-being) in addition to their immediate outputs, it is more and more important to **take the time to clarify your programme’s overall objectives** and what activities are needed to achieve these. A set of qualitative as well as quantitative indicators can usefully be linked to each objective as this will aid **on-going progress monitoring** and / or **real-time evaluation**, as well as reports on programme progress at the end of the year (Report 414). A compressed design stage can result in ‘serious delays in implementation, the need for redesigning midstream, and even aborted activities’ (Report 216).

Lesson 2: Multi-scenario planning and programme flexibility

Programme planning should involve the **identification of different scenarios**. Different plans need to be drawn up on this basis, especially given the volatile and unpredictable operational environment in Liberia. This will **facilitate programme flexibility**, enabling your agency to respond to **unanticipated developments**. Report 325 notes UNHCR’s past success in Liberia is a result of innovation, open-mindedness and creativity. On-going monitoring, including of your external environment, makes for responsive and adaptable programming.

Lesson 3: Building development into the early stages of post-conflict planning

It is crucial to **build a development perspective into post-conflict programme planning**. Reports are unanimous on this issue. For example, with regard to **refugee re-integration**, Report 325 notes that short-term reintegration activities are more easily sustained if linked to longer term rehabilitation and development programmes in a coordinated fashion, and across agencies and national/local authorities. This is especially important in countries like Liberia where authorities are under-resourced and have very little operational capacity. **Cross agency linkages must be established in a systematic fashion to increase the chances of sustainability.**

Report 214 notes **good practice** in terms of WFP's **food-for-work programmes** in Liberia. For example, as incentives for teachers in refugee and IDP schools, as an input into agricultural and income-generating projects with the objective of promoting longer term self-sufficiency, and as payment in kind for a wide range of manual work undertaken by ex-combatants. Thus relief becomes 'productive relief' (Report 214).

Lesson 4: Situation analysis

It is important to **understand the composition and dynamics** of the communities in which you work. This will best enable flexible and responsive programming. For example, a number of the reports mention micro-credit projects as an effective rehabilitation and development tool. However, in order to design effective micro-credit programmes you need to know about the local socio-economic situation (Report 216). Importantly, in countries such as Liberia, the support and creation of small-scale agricultural enterprises can boost food security, and micro-credit programmes in general can support local economic activity and revive local marketing (especially if roads and other infrastructure are repaired). Once again, if such programmes start up too quickly the issue of sustainability could be problematic. Harmonization is also key when taking a 'whole community approach' (see **Lesson 8**).

Early situation analysis is seen as **particularly important for reintegration programmes**: 'where possible, an early situation analysis in prospective returnee areas should be undertaken so as to make proper advance planning for reintegration' (Report 216). It will be important to develop skills profiles, groups' own reintegration strategies, local authority capacity to implement/sustain reintegration, etc. Moreover, 'The frontline of protection, especially for refugee children, is the social structure' (Report 414). Confusions over child protection have been found to occur when there has been insufficient situation analysis.

Note: Situation analysis is different to needs assessment. Reports state that coordination is key to effective needs assessment – for example, **joint assessments** of damages and needs – in order to avoid, for instance, the application of different food basket and ration scales to beneficiaries in the same area.

Lesson 5: Community participation

Those **programmes that are most successful involve communities in their identification**. Community participation is covered in greater detail in Section 2 on Programme Delivery.

2. Programme Delivery

Lesson 6: Appropriate targeting

Reports generally agree that, **initially at least, programmes should not be universally applied**: different regions and towns may have different needs depending on their demographics (also rural vs urban, etc). It is also important to **identify target populations on the basis of actual need rather than expediency**. For example, the basic beneficiary categories of refugees, IDPs and war-affected will all face different problems and therefore have different needs; this should be planned for on an on-going basis. An example of **good practice in food targeting** in Liberia is found in Report 214. This states that: 'Verifications and physical counts, although time-consuming and costly to organise, consistently addressed the problem of over-registration and thus ensured that more of the WFP assistance went to the right groups.'

With regard to returnees, Report 216 suggests that **support measures should be differentiated** along the following lines: sex, age and family situation; length of stay in exile; spontaneous return or organised repatriation; rural or urban origin/destination. Report 414, on the other hand, proposes that child

protection be organised according to the following: the under fives, five to nine, 10–14 yrs, and 15–18 yrs. In addition, gender analysis must cut across this breakdown. In Liberia, it will also be important to establish different categories of ex-combatants (Report 216). However, **the targeting of particular groups for short-term political reasons needs to be avoided at all costs**, especially in highly charged post-conflict environments.

Conversely, **the ‘whole community’ approach will be important over the longer term** and a recommendation in Report 216 suggests that UNDP adopt an ‘area based’ and multi-sectoral approach at community level for the longer term reintegration of war-affected populations (this of course may involve more than one agency; **see Lesson 8**). The community development approach is also recommended in Report 414 with regard to the protection of children. This **links to Lesson 3** about building a development perspective early into post-conflict planning. So while targeting may take place, this should be in the context of whole area / community support.

Lesson 7: Community participation for sustainability

As mentioned above, the **most successful programmes commonly involve communities not only in their identification, but also in their design, implementation and maintenance**. Projects undertaken in this way are ‘more likely to meet the priority needs of the population, to prove sustainable and to create an enabling environment for other local initiatives’ (Report 325). Most crucially, **local and national coping strategies should be taken into account and built upon**.

On the other hand full-scale participation may delay programme delivery. It may well be that you can only manage ‘**partial participation**’ as a result. This, however, should not be used as an excuse not to pursue genuine collaborative relationships with beneficiaries: there is much more to participation than simple consultation.

It is important to **clarify what you mean by participation and its associated notion of empowerment**. This will be important when it comes to monitoring and evaluating your programmes, as it will involve the design of relevant indicators of participation and empowerment. It is also important to **properly understand the notion of community**: all too often the **most powerful** come forward who are either **unable or unwilling to represent the interests of less powerful groups** such as women, children and the landless. This is **linked to Lesson 4**. Part of UNHCR’s previous success in Liberia is attributed to its ability to ‘empower’ the less powerful members of the community through the introduction of participatory and gender-sensitive reintegration activities (Report 325).

Good practice examples of community participation in Liberia are found throughout the reports. For example, boosting the local economy through local expenditures and paying wages to workers engaged in participation exercises and other programme activities; creating a supportive and enabling environment in which returnees, their communities and other local actors can develop some of their own capacity to undertake reintegration and rehabilitation. This encourages sustainability over the long term. Access to land for cultivation is crucial to effective reintegration.

Lesson 8: Comparative advantage, harmonisation and coordination

‘Both humanitarian and development agencies tend to focus on mandates rather than the needs of war-affected populations, [relative] institutional capacities and comparative advantage’ (Report 216). Field managers are encouraged to **pursue joint programming, including with government and local organisations**, and note what works, what doesn’t, and why. One suggestion is for this to be done through a **Joint Programming Unit (JPU)**; see p47 of Report 216). These should **support, not replace, government and other local structures**, and identify and make the best use of the comparative advantage of each agency – emphasis on integration being key.

All **agencies are urged to attend joint planning/coordination meetings**. For example, while UNHCR-Liberia has conducted regular field and management level meetings in the past, the fact that only HRC-Liberia and its implementing partners attended reduces the agency’s and others’ ability to collectively strategise and allocate resources in a more effective manner for forward planning. This is **important given the need to link relief, rehabilitation and development**. **Donors should be encouraged to attend** these meetings as well. See Report 409 for more details.

Coordination is crucial to all aspects of effective programme delivery, not least with regard to comparative advantage and harmonisation. **Effective coordination** consists of effortful, step-by-step

collaborative efforts undertaken to improve individual agency effectiveness while simultaneously enhancing overall assistance. Report 216 suggests that, 'in post-conflict situations, joint assessments of damages and needs are excellent starting points for coordination'. A **good practice example of collaboration and coordination in Liberia** is that of the **Liberian Children's Initiative** (Report 414). Education was central to the success of this initiative, as was a children's radio programme, 'Children's World'. A key lesson is that a three-year rather than one-year timeframe would be more appropriate to the complexities of phasing from relief to longer term activities.

Linked to harmonisation is the issue of **prioritisation**. Reports identify competing priorities as a severe hindrance to programme delivery, second only after funding cuts. Finally, **harmonisation also refers to the integration of programmes within a single agency. For example, UNDP learnt in Liberia** (Report 216) the importance of conceiving and planning demobilisation and reintegration programmes together. With regard to child protection, this works best when planned with community services, health (eg, psychosocial), and education (Report 414).

Lesson 9: Devolution

The issue of devolution is identified by many of the reports. Programmes should adopt a **decentralised approach** so that decisions on project identification and resource allocation can be taken as close to the point of delivery as possible. Previous reports identified a problem with centralisation in Monrovia. This also applies to over-centralisation in regional/international agency HQ. Devolution is also important when it comes to **fine tuning training programmes to meet local needs** rather than applying these universally.

3. Staffing

Issues relating to staffing are many and well-known, and can make or break a programme. The lessons below serve to remind us of just some of the key concerns:

Lesson 10: Technical assistance (and supportive management)

All too often field staff are aware of, and understand, organisational policy but **do not know how best to operationalise it**. Direct technical assistance is therefore required to review and adjust field operations: time and again reports point to a gap between policy and practice, in which appropriate technical assistance plays a key bridging role. **Field managers have a crucial role to play in ensuring staff are clear on how to operate within organisational policy** (Report 214). Field staff repeatedly note that their best practice is achieved as a result of appropriate technical assistance on policy, guidelines and best practice, identified with the active support of management (eg, Report 414). Such assistance needs to be country / locale specific.

Lesson 11: Effective mainstreaming and the role of specialist staff

The goal of **mainstreaming is vital**, be it with regard to gender analysis or child protection, etc. Three factors that aid mainstreaming are: the role of **specialist staff, training and capacity building, and partnerships and collaboration**. Specialist staff in particular play a crucial role in mainstreaming as they can facilitate and deliver training and capacity building, help with appropriate needs assessment, assist field managers to bridge the policy / practice divide, assist with coordination, etc. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for country offices – both managers and staff – to be unconvinced of the need for specialist staff at field level, despite a **common finding** in the reports **relating to the pivotal role of specialist staff**, especially at regional level.

Lesson 12: On-going monitoring (and strategic review and evaluation)

The strength of the management team determines the clarity of this work, though it is **worthwhile investing in staff development to enable delegation of responsibility and activities** in this area. Among other things this: (1) frees up management time, and (2) devolves control and allows for innovation in methods of data collection. It is now widely recognised that there **needs to be a designated staff person to take overall responsibility for on-going monitoring**. It is particularly important to capture

lessons from shorter term post-conflict operations in order to enhance institutional memory, so that new project managers don't view prevailing constraints as new and unique.

4. Relationships with Implementing Partners

Relationships with implementing partners should consider the following. Once again, this list is by no means exhaustive and reports can be consulted for further details:

- As an outside agency working within a community development response (see **Lessons 3 & 6**) your agency is a facilitator and catalyst, not manager or service deliverer. For example, **good practice** in the protection of refugee children in Liberia has been seen to involve working **respectfully** with community based social systems and networks.
- MOUs with government, national NGOs and other actors are helpful in this respect. These enable a cross-mandate approach, and help to define responsibilities, procedures and sectors of intervention as well as how relationships will work. Sector and activity-related taskforces can be usefully set up within this framework.
- Relationships with implementing partners need to be equal. Partners should be allowed to participate fully in planning decisions rather than being treated as contractors. This is important for local NGOs.
- Effective relationships with local actors can facilitate access. On the other hand, agencies must understand the position of partners within the local context in order to avoid becoming embroiled in difficult political situations. Hence the need for a good situation and actor analysis.. Moreover, a **key lesson from earlier intervention in Liberia** is the need to avoid compromising humanitarian (and rehabilitation and development) activities by real or perceived association with political and military institutions and initiatives (Report 29).
- Partnerships can be strengthened through local capacity building initiatives as well as harmonising staff treatment. Some of the reports mention the importance of incentives to penalise corruption and reward good performance
- Benefits need to be shared with host populations; community members should see collaboration as addressing a certain problem in their own self-interest.
- A **good example** of effective international-local collaboration is that of WFP with the Liberian NGO SELF (Report 214) which introduced a commodity tracking, recording and reporting system. Lack of such a system would have hampered delivery as well as consistent reporting to donors.

Evaluative reports used as the basis of this briefing:

Meeting the Rights and Protection Needs of Refugee Children: An Independent Evaluation of the Impact of UNHCR's Activities. By Valid International, UNHCR, Oxford, UK. May 2002. ALNAP 414

The WHALE: Wisdom we have Acquired from the Liberia Experience: Report of a Regional Lessons-learned Workshop in Monrovia, April 2001. By Jeff Crisp, UNHCR, ALNAP 325

Review of UNHCR Country Programmes: Synthesis of Findings (Includes reference to the country programme in Liberia) UK DfID. May 2000. ALNAP 410

DfID's Review of UNCHR's Programme in Liberia, with Focus on Sierra Leonean Refugees. DfID (CHAD). February 2000. ALNAP 409

Sharing New Ground in Post-conflict Situations: The Role of UNDP in Support of Reintegration Programmes. (Includes reference to the UNDP country programme in Liberia) UNDP Evaluation Office. January 2000. ALNAP 216

Protracted Emergency Humanitarian Relief Food Aid: Toward 'Productive Relief' - Programme Policy Evaluation of the 1990-95 period of WFP-assisted refugee and displaced persons operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire WFP. October 1996. ALNAP 214

Humanitarian Action and Security in Liberia 1989-94. By Colin Scott in collaboration with Larry Minear and Thomas G Weiss Humanitarianism and War Project, Occasional Paper 20. 1995. ALNAP 29

Key sections and further details of these documents are available from ALNAP's Evaluative Reports Database at www.alnap.org. Follow the link from our homepage to view documents available on Liberia.

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