

## **Hope Restoration Initiative (HORN): Disabled Liberian Youth, Civic Education, and Political Participation** Mid-July to 28, 2017, Monrovia, Liberia

### **University of Rochester**

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**Background:** Liberia is recovering from a bloody civil instability that killed over 250,000 people, displaced more than a million, and left others with the lasting marks of conflict violence such as disability, extreme poverty, social trauma left on women and girls who were violated, and the destruction of properties. This blood bath, which lasted from 1989 to 2003, left Liberia in a shackle that subjected its less fortunate citizens to despair. In 2005, Liberia elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, making her the first ever female head of state to be elected democratically in any African country. Despite Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's immense contributions to the stability of peace and the restoration of hope in this nation, there remains innumerable challenges that are yet to be overcome in the country. Liberia experienced the deadly Ebola virus crisis and was one of the countries with the highest rate of virus contraction, taking the lives of over 11,300 people in West Africa from 2014 to 2015. The country goes to elections this year, which will determine if the country will continue a peaceful trajectory or will go back into a dark period.

This country is at a critical point in its history. On October 10 of this year, Liberia will hold general elections that will see the current president, Madam Sirleaf handing over power to a new leader after successfully completing two terms in office. The 2017 elections will serve as an actual test to determine whether this nation can maintain and improve on the fragile peace that it has continued to enjoy for the past almost 16 years since the civil war ended. We believe that equal participation in the Liberian elections will be cardinal to maintaining and strengthening the peace that is needed for the development of the country. It cannot be overemphasized that Liberia is at a crossroad where every person's vote will matter, irrespective of their social status over the past years in society, to determine continuous growth to the national peace and democracy.

**Project Summary:** The Hope Restoration Initiative (HORN)-Project for Peace addresses some of the problems that persons with disabilities face when it comes to equal participation in the electoral process in Liberia. As a disabled Liberian youth who has observed the 2005 and 2011 elections, Emmanuel has noticed that the country, particularly the National Elections Commissions of Liberia (NEC), encountered enormous challenges in getting disabled people to fully exercise their individual franchise during previously held elections. Disabled individuals in Liberia must deal with the huge challenge of transportation to voting centers, which make them too often lose interest in the electoral process. The lack of interest in the electoral process often leads them to be unaware of the basic voting rules in these elections. Also, many do not know the importance of exercising their rights to vote. These problems all serve as barriers that stop them from voting. For peaceful transition of power to occur after the elections, there should be equal rights given to each person who is eligible by law to vote and there should be nothing hindering Liberians from exercising this basic right. The HORN project will buttress the country's efforts by promoting equal participation for all in the 2017 elections. Our project targets disabled youths within central Monrovia and its surrounding communities by: a) conducting sessions in a week-long seminar to educate these vulnerable youths about the importance of voting in the general elections, both for themselves and the growth of the country, by conducting civic responsibilities workshops and, b) by helping to facilitate the accommodational and transportation needs for those disabled persons who need assistance in getting to the polling centers. It is estimated that 16% of the Liberian population suffers from different kinds of disabilities (2008 census by Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LIGIS)). We have no doubt that people with disabilities are the most marginalized group in Liberia since Emmanuel experienced this marginalization daily while growing up. As such, disabled citizens lack the interest in voting because of the feeling of being left out of society. Allowing 16% or more of the Liberian population not to vote is very worrisome. The HORN Project will conduct workshops and we, as students coming from backgrounds that have experienced difficulties, will use our stories to encourage youth across Monrovia to vote because it involves their future.

Our workshops will focus on changing the way disabled people perceive themselves due to social discrimination. Over the years our society has perceived the disabled as a group of people who need to be taken care of, and the effect of this way of thinking is that our society slowly alienated disabled people. The long-term goal of our teachings in these workshops will be to bring back disabled people in our society and change the mindset of seeing disability as inability, but see a disabled person as any other person who can bring a positive impact in our society.

**Workshops content/objectives:** Through a one-week non-partisan seminar, we will conduct workshops for 100 to 150 disabled youth about understanding the general electoral system of Liberia. We intend to invite a few

stakeholders from independent human rights organizations, the National Elections Commissions of Liberia (NEC), and civil society groups to teach and have dialogue with the participants about issues that have hindered disabled individuals from fully partaking in voting process, running for electoral posts over the past years and brainstorming solutions for those issues recommended from these sessions. We and the other facilitators from our partner organizations, will identify a one-day suitable community service project nearby to get participants to serve the public as part of being engaged in society. During the same week, participants will engage in teambuilding sessions with one another through games that will use the information and skills that they receive in the workshops. We will end with personal reflections in small groups. We shall set up a system to take care of the transportation needs for those youths that may need accommodational assistance getting to the polls on the day of the general elections. After this project, disabled youth will have the knowledge and means needed to actively engage in elections and, they will have the mindset of contributing to their communities which will reunite and integrate them with the rest of society.

**Local Partners/Resources:** We are going to work with two main organizations: 1) *the Foundation for Women Liberia (FFW-Liberia)/Edify*, which is a micro-loan institution that works with market women as well as disabled people in providing small financial loans for their economic empowerment. FFW also works with local schools. Staff members from this organization will be serving as workshops facilitators for the civic education drive. Also, they will provide a space, through one of their disabled partner schools, for us to conduct our program. 2) *Smart Liberia* is a youth-driven organization that advocates for the rights of young people in education within Liberia. Through its “Lift Liberia” Scholars program, they mentor young people to become successful in their academic journeys. Smart Liberia has agreed to offer us 10 young participants from their organization to volunteer for our transportation drive on election day on October 10, 2017.

**Sustainability of the HORN Project for Peace:** At the end of July, we plan to create a mentorship network to continue working with the youths who have received trainings through our program, so that they may serve as voices for other young disabled Liberians. Through our implementing partners, we intend to maintain a network of youth volunteers in Liberia that will continue to advocate and provide training to more disabled individuals across Monrovia. Our long-term goal is to transform the Hope Restoration iNitiatives into a non-profit organization that will continue to help address the many needs disabled people encounter in Liberia, as well as Africa at large.

**About us:** Emmanuel Gweamee is a Liberian majoring in Environmental Science with also an intention of majoring in International Relations. Aime Laurent Twizerimana is a Rwandan majoring in Chemical Engineering. As a young Rwandan who grew up in post-genocide Rwanda, Laurent offers the perspective of living in a country that has made great strides in national healing and fast track development, and which serves as a model for many countries around the world that have gone through conflict. Both of us have experiences that we can share with our fellow young people to encourage them to contribute to peace by engaging in their communities and being agents for peace in their surroundings.