

Hope Restoration iNitiative (HORN)

Liberia

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The goal of the HORN project was to educate disabled Liberian youth about their basic civic responsibilities through teaching them about the electoral process. By bringing in outside speakers and holding group discussions, we aimed at engaging participants to talk about challenges that disabled people face daily by providing recommendations that will help solve those problems.

Social rejection often leads to a feeling of powerlessness which contributes to the lack of motivation by disabled people to participate in political activities. This issue helps increase low voters turnout in past elections, which is not good for the stability of a country that is still recovering from 14 years of civil war. The October 2017 election is crucial in sustaining peace in Liberia through a peaceful democratic regime change and as such, our project helped motivate persons with disability to vote in the October 2017 elections to increase the voter turnout for a better decision. Specifically, we used education, work, and employment; participation in political and public life; health, and participation in cultural life; recreation, leisure, and sport respectively as topics to conduct our workshop sessions.

After arriving in Liberia, we conducted meetings with SmartLiberia and finalized our venue and other equipment that we needed to do our project. Our program worked with 10 volunteers, most of whom came from SmartLiberia, with a few coming from local universities. The African Youth with Disabilities Network (AYWD)-Liberia chapter helped us with finding 45 participants for our program. We then had meetings with Mr. Senesee Freeman, the Director of Civic Voter Education (CVE) of the National Elections Commissions (NEC) of Liberia, who agreed to present to educate our participants about the electoral process. We did not receive external funding for our project.

Our participants were disabled people of voting ages (18 and above); the majority came from central Monrovia and were visually impaired. The workshops lasted from Monday, July 17th to Thursday, July 20th. The workshops were divided into three main segments daily: guest lecturers' presentations, explanation of the topic for the day, and group sessions (group discussions) that focused on the theme of each day. The topics covered were retrieved from the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities(CRPD)," adopted by the United Nations on 13 December 2006 and ratified by Liberia on 26 July 2012. Five years later, Liberia has yet to fully implement these policies. It is hard for disabled people to exercise their civic responsibilities as citizens when they don't know their rights. Emmanuel served as the speaker, on the first day using "Education" as the theme for the day. He used the story of his journey from Monrovia to the US to pursue education as a physically challenged person in order to motivate participants about not allowing their disabilities to hold them back on their quest to acquire education. On day two, Mr. James Ngafuan, an official from NEC, spoke on behalf of the Director of CVE and educated participants about the general voting process' timeline. He spoke about measures that NEC was putting in place to ensure that persons with disabilities can independently participate in the 2017 elections. His presentation was interactive and he took recommendations from participants. Furthermore, the director of graphics at the *In Profile Daily Newspaper* served as our guest lecturer on the third day; he affirmed the media's commitment to voicing the concerns of disabled youths. He promised that his newspaper was willing to support disabled youths' efforts to advocate for equality. After each guest speaker's presentation, we took a lunch break, and then proceeded with dividing the participants into four groups. Volunteers read aloud the articles being discussed for that day, and then directed the discussion to guide participants about the challenges disabled people meet in exercising their rights, and what might be done to solve those issues.

In addition to conducting workshops, our project covered the transportation cost for 100 “vulnerable” disabled youths to ensure that these youths can physically access the polling centers on October 10, 2017. Coordinators from AYWDN will supervise the transportation process on the day of the elections. In general, our project benefitted 140 people living with disabilities from five counties including Monrovia.

The reality on the ground was different from some of the things we foresaw while planning on campus. For example, we had hoped to work with at least 100 participants during our trainings but we were only able to train a little over 40 persons in our workshops. This was solely because schools were closed and disabled youths were scattered across the country at the time of the project. We started working with AYWDN quite late and some of the plans we had were unrealistic. We slightly adjusted the budget to address the issues of accommodation (both lodging for us and the venue for conducting the workshops), food, and transport, because prices had increased more from we initially anticipated. We managed to use our budget well, but we had to make some few changes for it to fit with the Liberian market. There was also a language barrier between Laurent and the participants during the workshop sessions. He was surprised to learn that most of the people spoke “Liberian English,” which is different from standard English, in daily conversation.

We plan to continue working with AYWD for our future programs in Liberia. As we ended our project, we started helping AYWD with their ongoing project on law reforms for disabled people in Liberia. We plan to create an empowerment program to give entrepreneurial skills to disabled youths to enable them to break the circle of poverty. In this way, we want to highlight their abilities rather than their disabilities. Our biggest plan is to organize entrepreneurship competitions for disabled youths through an annual concert to help raise funding and provide training for the best business ideas. This will help promote self-empowerment to reduce the unemployment rate among disabled people, making a large impact on persons with disabilities.

We define peace as providing equal rights and justice for everyone in society. To us, making every individual feel accepted, regardless of differences, can help sustain lasting peace. Civility and political inclusion are important in the maintenance of peace in any society. The HORN project created the platform to increase voter turnout amongst disabled people, who are generally forgotten about in the political process, for the 2017 Liberian elections. Our concept of peace is centered around solving the smaller injustices that exist in various societies, which lead to bigger conflicts like war. Actual peace starts with addressing the social, political, and economic gaps that exist among people in general, and Liberians in specific.

“In this project, I have learned that people with disabilities have a lot of potentials to contribute to the growth of our respective communities, but they only lack people who can listen to them and help them to break barriers and limits our societies have imposed on their abilities. We only look at them through a lens of disability, but we can gain more by focusing their abilities.” Aime Laurent Twizerimana

“This project has taught me that equality is the hallmark to developing the Liberian society. Creating policies to provide employment, education, political participation, healthcare, and justice to persons with disabilities in Liberia will help promote a more inclusive society that we all envision.” Emmanuel Gweamee



A few photos from our workshops and group discussions in Liberia.