

Monrovia – Liberia - Visit report

Izabel Barros - visit 30th March – 11th April - 2017

Together with the Liberian project manager and Cooperaxion's director Marianne Naeff, I had the opportunity to visit our projects and project partners in Liberia. As the project manager for the Brazil projects and close follower of our Liberian projects since 2013, this visit played a central role in my "personal journey" within Cooperaxion's work, values and practices. The personal contact allowed me to understand better the particular issues our partners face daily, have an overview of the political and social context Liberian youth live in, compare and exchange experiences acquired in our projects in Brazil – both countries having been deeply marked by colonial experience, racial tensions and a wide social gap.

In two weeks, we visited our two project partners YOCADS and James Mulbah, Green Cities C.O. We visited project beneficiaries, accompanied our partner's events, joined in their daily activities and together networked with key players. Despite their common engagement on behalf of youth and development, the two partners face different challenges. That is why we will be contextualizing and reporting them separately in this paper. The goal here is to review the developed activities, make suggestions, if necessary, and to observe the relation between Cooperaxion and the local partner organizations.

PLASTIC RECYCLING PROJECT

WATER - A HUMAN RIGHT CONVERTED INTO A PRODUCT

According to WaterAid America, 3.7 million people in Liberia don't have access to adequate sanitation and 1.1 million people have no access to safe water. As a result, more than 800 children die every year from diseases related to poor sanitation and water access¹. This scenario could be much worse if it wouldn't be for the drinking water bags. At a price between L\$ 5 and L\$ 8 - 1 water bag, 500ml - or between L\$ 50 and L\$ 75 – a pack with 30 water bags – most Liberians consume daily at least three water bags.

Big water producer companies are organized under the Association of Liberia Water Producers (ALWP). This association stipulates the water health standards and prices, and monitors its members. However, outside of the member circle, they have limited or no influence over the small producers scattered all over the country.

Currently, a "water bag"-machine imported from China costs between US\$ 1,800-2,800 – it fills and seals between 1,500 and 2,000 bags per hour. This means that the investment needed to start producing water bags is very low, the market is very demanding and the return on investment is increasingly linked to the water quality². The whole water production market has practically no state monitoring or control, in this context many "garage factories" pop up all over the country, risking people's health and profiting from the poor national water access and service.

The Liberian state relies mainly on international aid to provide basic assistance services. Aid is limited and it's far from supplying the whole country or making the necessary infrastructural reforms to guarantee quality water or sanitation access. This means that unfortunately it may stay that way for

¹ <http://www.wateraidamerica.org/liberia>

² For further information about water production issues and controlling see: Liberia: "We are upset as water producers", 27 February 2017, All Africa, link: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201702240796.html>

the next years, with no prospect of change. 83.8% of Liberians live on less than US\$ 1.25 per day³ - for them, water bags are the safest and only way to hydrate.

The Liberian state, international presence in the country, the population, everyone knows the central role those plastic bags play in Liberian life and health. Despite this importance, no governmental measure was created to control quality, production or the price of water.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND SOCIAL NEGLIGENCE

The enormous amount of water bags consumed becomes apparent when we look at the landscape. Mountains of empty water bags lying in the streets, creeks and the sea. The authorities or international aid organizations do not pay particular attention to the water bags. While these bags supply the population with clean water, they create a huge environmental problem.

Three years ago, Cooperaxion and its local partner James Mulbah started the “Plastic Recycling Project”, with the goal to give value to the plastic water bags and to transform it into raw material to manufacture new products. In addition, James Mulbah’s Green Cities helps families to generate income by buying used plastic bags or gallons from anyone who collects the waste. Green Cities assumes then the major social responsibility of cleaning and transforming a specific waste – result of water shortage. Yet, despite its obvious importance James Mulbah and his Center have, they have to face the same issues as all other companies in Liberia. Electricity and its stability is poor, no governmental support, tax reduction or credit. Plastic have still to be washed by hand what requires a lot of personal investment.

Apart from plastic, Green Cities recycles several other materials such as aluminum, electronical waste, batteries and green waste. A serious engagement essential for Liberian environment.

LIBERIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND ITS CHALLENGES

A source of major difficulty in the local labor and entrepreneur market is the long Liberian tradition of strongly rooted oligarchic culture. Two civil wars couldn’t erase the influence of Americo-Liberians or members of the Freemasons. Apparently innocent in other parts of the world, these groups control key positions and companies all over the country. In addition to lobby groups, chances in the working market are considerably increased if the candidate has lived abroad, especially in the USA. This makes it even more difficult for well locally-educated professionals to insert themselves into an already saturated labor market. Despite all those challenges, James Mulbah runs his visionary and innovative business. Green Cities works as a platform for other young people that, like Mulbah, have no American roots or financial background to study abroad.

GREEN CITIES

Immediately behind the Nancy Doe market, the most important Market in Sinkor, we find Green Cities. Painted green, as the name suggest, it’s a necessary stop for many people living from waste collection., James Mulbah offers a complete tour of the site to everyone who arrives at the Green Center for the first time. Its cheerful young crew is frequently seen cutting, washing or melting a mountain of plastic pieces, or busy driving the company truck to collect waste from another community center. All crew members know all the steps of waste collection, cleaning and recycling. They are equally prepared to offer the initial workshop delivered to schools, hotels, community youth centers, companies, markets ... in order to start a new collaboration. It’s not rare to see James Mulbah, asking one or two members of the crew to join him in a meeting with the vice-president or any minister. His companions are always invited to share their experiences and they are directly involved in the company’s vision. This

³ Unicef – at a glance – Liberia (2007–2011) – Statistics – https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/liberia_statistics.html

democratic based company reminded me more of a cooperative than a traditional profit-oriented business.

COOPERAXION AND GREEN CITIES – SOUTH -SOUTH PLATAFORM

Cooperaxion and James Mulbah have been working together since the end of 2013. Despite all local infrastructural difficulties as energy and water shortage, insecurity, little or no governmental support, Green Cities’ plastic recycling segment has grown to become the company’s flagship. The normally difficult process of sharing decisions between donors and local partners, especially when it comes to business questions, have been impressively collaborative. Both partners benefit extensively from the know-how, influence and network of each other, which is very positive in the context of project development.

One of the goals of my visit was to reinforce the exchange between our partners and projects in South. Despite the common social issues shared by Brazil and Liberia - result of colonialism and unequal wealth distribution - we were always surprised by the immediate bond of solidarity and tenderness built between both partners and beneficiaries during all of Cooperaxion’s project exchanges (Brazilian video support during Ebola crises and Liberian answers, visits and project reports and my recent report about our project in Brazil in April). For all those involved in the Brazilian Quilombos project, Africa and Liberia has an important ancestral significance that overwhelms us all. In all our exchanges, everyone was excited by the deep similarities between people, their way of life and scenery. In addition to that, challenges and issues are similar - exchanging experiences could be extremely rich. A continual dialogue between both projects and countries is strongly recommended and welcomed.

