

## Monrovia – Liberia - Visit report

### Izabel Barros - visit 30<sup>th</sup> March – 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

#### YOCADS – KICK FOR YOUR FUTURE

##### CONTEXT

Even though the efforts of the civil society to erase visible signs of the war and the Ebola outbreak 2014-2015, YOCADS have to face a heavy heritage. The two communities in focus of YOCADS' work, Soniwein and Clara Town, are densely populated and receive poor or no governmental attention: no pavement, sanitation or access to water. The communities rely mainly on international aid to assure their needs. Soniwein for instance has a good health center built by Swiss and German international cooperation. The detachment and disbelief in the State has a negative impact on the local youth, who often dream of a better life abroad in USA or Europe. Because of financial difficulties and an extended network, Monrovia young adults are constantly moving, which requires a substantial effort from YOCADS to trace beneficiaries in order to guarantee the knowledge exchange between former and new beneficiaries and build a strong working base.

Another big challenge to YOCADS is the constant development and mutation of young people's issues. Through the Internet, youth have been constantly exposed to an important consumer market, far from their daily reality. It's important to underline that the Internet arrived in urban communities before sanitation, electricity or access to water.

We venture to say that the important presences of big NGOs and international aid have had harmful side effects on the Liberian society. Their work had been basically meant for emergency situations (peace keeping, infrastructure reconstruction and epidemic control) without a democratic and profound dialogue with the civil society. This led to a dependence cycle, with the Liberian sovereignty constantly being questioned. The working practices of international aid, submitted to a global hierarchy, left a pernicious legacy in the country's capital. The local youth organization YOCADS struggles to find its own practices and working models inside of this long term built system – often clashing with the interests of its own team and beneficiaries.

##### YOCADS PROJECTS

YOCADS vocational project is equally unique in the region. Inserting young apprentices in local shops, ateliers and garages, closely following their development and supporting them through autonomy, if

necessary: all this break dependency cycles and allows young adults to take their lives into their own hands, increasing their self-esteem and giving them a local perspective and a concrete base to plan their immediate and long-term future. This last point is the most significant, since the absence of future perspectives represents a source of profound anxiety for every individual.

Thanks to its long presence in the communities and the important fieldwork, enriched by substantial sub-projects as the football training, sanitation and sensitization activities, YOCADS have succeeded despite serious challenges.

Unfortunately, a significant budget reduction for side activities without a clear communication about the consequences led to incomprehension among beneficiaries. This challenge was recently converted following an invitation to share responsibilities and facility appropriation. In practical terms, through their representatives the beneficiaries had a say in the facilities' budget allowing them to prioritize their needs collectively.

In order to oppose individualism and reinforce democracy-based work in the long term, YOCADS launched the mobilization program Public Policy in preparation for the October elections. Not only beneficiaries but the whole community profits from debate exchange on election process, social demands and civil rights.

## COOPERAXION AND YOCADS / SOUTH – SOUTH PLATAFORM

Cooperaxion and YOCADS have now been collaborating for 10 years. Swiss and Liberian partners reached in the last two years a formal partnership based over punctual assistance and team motivation rather than management. I was impressed by the strong promotion of local partner's autonomy both in financial and practical matters. Even though long-distance communication is still a major issue, all core protagonists are compromised with the project's success and optimal realization. However, it would be expected from all the team members (volunteers and coaches group) the same commitment with the project as a whole – Given their direct contact and work with the beneficiaries, transparence, open communication and decision sharing could benefit from improving the complete structure. Perspective-changing, democracy-based and independent international aid must be internalized by the whole team in order to work.

According to volunteers, community leaders and beneficiaries, YOCADS' long-term work has had a central impact in both communities, especially concerning violence and drug abuse among young people, women empowerment, personal and collective social improvements. It's important to acknowledge the fundamental contribution of YOCADS team and work throughout the years. In order to update, improve and recall the importance of the whole team we suggest a skills assessment of the management team, volunteers, coaches and eventually long-term beneficiaries. We could then valorize the team, reorient our goals and practices.

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.