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## **ORIGINAL RESEARCH**

### **From their own words: An explorative qualitative study on the experience of combatants disabled in the Liberian civil war,1989-2003**

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## Abstract

**Aim:** To explore the experience of fighters disabled during the Liberian civil war; what they did and what was done to them; and what happened after their demobilization.

**Methods:** Six focus group discussions were organized in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, with 50 invalid veterans aged 10 to 25 at their entrance into the war and eight women wounded, although civilians, sampled as in convenience. In addition, seven key-informant interviews took place. All encounters were agreeably taped, transcribed and summarized under the items of the discussion guide.

**Results:** Most ex-combatants joined the fighting to protect themselves and their families who were targeted by rebel fighters or joined to revenge the killing of close family members by fighters from all sides including government soldiers. Nearly all the former fighters interviewed expressed their desire to be trained in various areas of life skills. A vast majority of the ex-combatants are living from begging in the streets. Those from factions feel that government cares for former regular soldiers and discriminates those from other warring factions. The lack of housing for ex-combatants with war related infirmities is of paramount concern to them. They feel that the post-war reintegration program did not achieve its objectives. In the communities, they are stigmatized, blamed as the ones who brought suffering to their own people. The key informants are calling for establishment of trust fund for survivors of the civil war who are disabled.

**Recommendations:** Establishment of a trust fund for survivors of the civil war who are disabled; reform of the National Bureau of Veteran Affairs to include the disabled ex-combatants of all former warring factions; erection as planned of the proposed Veterans Hospital; a national census of disabled ex-combatants and war victims.

**Keywords:** civil war, demobilization, disabled combatants, Liberia, reconciliation.

**Conflicts of interest:** None.

**Acknowledgements:** This study has been conducted with service providers in mind, based on the social, economic and health status of the former fighters who were wounded and made disabled by the Liberian civil war. First and foremost, many thanks go to Professor Dr. Ulrich Laaser who took special interest in the disabled former combatants to the extent that he contributed the financial resources to enable the conduct of this study. He also encouraged colleagues of his to assist the research team implement. Prominent among this is Dr. Moses Galakpai who provided technical support to the research team and Roosevelt McCaco who in his free time took care of the financial management.

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## **Foreword**

The civil conflict has been over for nearly as many years as it lasted. The scars however are as visible today as were the horrible episodes of atrocities that characterized life during the war years. The wrecked economy of Liberia following the onset of the civil war, gross human rights violations, involvement of child soldiers and use of harmful substances by both armed fighters and civilians are all hallmarks of the Liberian civil war. Thousands of young people who were active members in the numerous fighting forces got maimed and are today disabled for various causes. What is true for nearly all of them is the fact that they are living under difficult circumstances - no jobs, no housing, and no sustainable care. With no preparation to face the harsh post conflict and post Ebola environment in Liberia, the disabled ex-combatants deserve attention that will give them hope, attention that will harness their potentials not only for sustaining themselves but for promoting peace in the nation. This publication, though conducted in only one of the 15 counties of Liberia, contributes to the knowledge needed for the attainment of a better living condition for disabled ex-combatants as well as promoting sustainable peace in Liberia.

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## **Introduction**

Liberia, to mean „Land of the Free“, was founded by freed American slaves who were sponsored to settle in Africa as early as 1822. Annexation of land from the indigenous tribes enabled the country to be formed until statehood was declared 1847. The lack of full integration of the indigenes was the main trigger for the civil war beginning on Christmas Eve in 1989 (1).

The large number of young people exposed to arms and use of harmful substances constitutes a significant risk for the sustainability of peace in the country. The idea to undertake this explorative study into their feelings and experience comes from the general observation of the appalling conditions of disabled veterans. Unable to earn a living due to the lack of skills compounded by the fact that they have lost parts of their bodies, the former combatants are in serious need of assistance which is not forthcoming. Not only are the disabled ex-combatants unable to provide daily food for themselves, but they are under incessant barrage of accusations of bringing suffering to their people. Such stance inhibits a free flow of material assistance to them as well as social acceptance (2).

Therefore this investigation attempts to document from *their own words* the past and present experience of former fighters who were disabled and traumatized during the civil war in Liberia including a selected number of civilian women wounded. In addition key informants have been interviewed and asked for their analysis and recommendations.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Population***

The qualitative study took place in Montserrado County which includes the capital Monrovia with more than a million inhabitants, about a quarter of Liberia's entire population. The respondents were recruited by non-probability sampling as in convenience between March 29 and May 3, 2017 through the Amputees Football Club in Monrovia (4) and consisted of two categories of respondents: The first comprised of five focus groups of ten former combatants each, together 50 participants who were disabled as a result of their participation in the fighting. These persons were from various fighting forces including those from the national army. Additionally, there were eight women who received their disabilities from bullets and bombs even though they were civilians; some were targeted while others were accidental. The selection process did not allow anyone to attend more than one focus group.

### ***Focus group discussions***

The study relied on a participatory approach and semi-structured narrative format. The discussion guide for the focus groups, taking about three hours, comprised a set of nine questions, assembled by four experts - three Liberian and one European - familiar with the setting. The questions were introduced to the focus groups by a moderator:

- 1) *Why and for which faction (out of eight) did you join the fight?*
- 2) *What was your rank and war-name and what weapons did you use?*
- 3) *What made you brave and how did you get wounded?*
- 4) *Did you commit atrocities yourself?*
- 5) *Did you meet later your comrades or your victims?*
- 6) *What is your experience with the demobilization program after the war ended?*
- 7) *Where and how do you live now and how are you received by the community?*
- 8) *Are you satisfied with your living conditions and what are your expectations?*
- 9) *How did you as a women experience the civil war? Voices of Female Survivors.*

### ***Key-informant interviews***

The seven key informants contacted had witnessed events during the civil war and were knowledgeable about former fighters and the programs initiated for their return to civilian life. They saw what happened or took part in what happened such as rendering social, relief or medical services to the population affected by the war. These included stakeholders and others such as project officers, focal point persons in security sector institutions, community leaders, and relevant government personnel. Although they were professionals in their own right, some of them were seen as rebel supporters because they operated in particular geographic locations controlled by warring factions. Seven such persons were interviewed on issues surrounding the following topics:

- 1) *The Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program (DDRR)*
- 2) *Key challenges facing ex-combatants*
- 3) *Strategic recommendations*

### ***Information processing***

All encounters were agreeably taped, transcribed and summarized under the items of the discussion guide by a team of Liberians under the guidance of the author.

## **Results**

### ***I. The Focus Group Interviews (FDG)***

#### ***Characterization of the participants***

Most of the discussants were young school-going children, when the war started. However, as the war progressed educational institutions in the war-affected areas were shut down, leaving thousands of idle youths susceptible to align themselves as child soldiers, boys and also girls (5), with the warring faction that was present in their areas of domicile.

#### ***1) Why and for which fraction did you join the fight?***

For most, as seen from their age profile, serving in the military was never then thought of. The discussants disclosed that the war was brought home when they witnessed the gruesome murder and mutilation of their relatives, the personal pain inflicted on them by those bearing arms whether government troops or members of opposing warring factions, the looting of their family's properties or just the excitement of being with members of their age group, all that served according to them as motivating factors to become fighters themselves. A couple of others were forcefully recruited and others joined because they were used as porters of ammunition and goods for the men at arms. Defections from the national army became commonplace joining one of the rebel factions (see box), some related to ethnical or religious background. Their allegiance to the armed group to which they belonged became stronger than the bond with their families and socio-cultural institutions that nurtured them and that they once respected.

#### ***2) What was your rank and war name and what weapons did you use?***

In order to persuade their men to obey their authority, those in command assigned meaningless ranks to fighters under their command. Such arbitrary ranks gave them an air of greatness. Additionally, there was no previous training to back the ranks. The discussants informed that rebel training sometimes lasted for only two months.

Examples of these fake ranks given by the discussants are: Field Commander, Full Colonel, General, Captain, Brigadier General, Lt. Colonel, Major, Chief of Staff.

War-names or nicknames played an important role in the behavior of the individual combatant and how he/she was perceived by comrades and commanders. Besides being used as a means to motivate combatants into action, nicknames served to conceal the real identity of the fighter. Nicknames were also used to promote certain behavior of the fighter. For example, “dog killer” could mean killer of the enemy (the dog). Someone bearing such nickname would live to prove that he is a killer of the enemy. Similar other nicknames of discussants were: Major Danger, Super killer, No Ma No Pa.

**Military groups named by participants as their own ones:**

Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL)

- Lofa Defense Force (LDF)
- Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD)
- National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL)
  - Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL)
  - National Patriotic Front of Liberia-Central Revolutionary Council (NPFL-CRC)
- United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO)
  - United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy-Johnson faction (ULIMO-J)
  - United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy-Kromah faction (ULIMO-K)

The discussants indicated that they used various weapons during the course of the war. The predominant one was the Kalashnikov (AK47 and others in the series). The combatants used the guns to exploit the civilians in their controlled areas, a major factor for the mass exodus of people out of the country. The proliferation of small arms in all areas controlled by warring factions made the entire country unsafe at the time especially that the combatants according to them served as the “justice systems” in their controlled areas. Many of these weapons were traded among warring factions as some combatants switched sides or needed money. However, heavier weapons fielded were more supervised by those in command.

*3) What made you brave and how did you get wounded?*

Myths and rumors surrounding the composition of rebel fighting forces and their use of mystic powers coupled with the government’s mismanagement of the war, greatly aided the demoralization of the better trained government troops to the point of stimulating mass defections. The rapid advance of rebel forces mainly rested on the highly motivated youths most of whom were given drugs and other substances to influence their behavior, giving them a false sense of invincibility. Some others mentioned the use of drugs and strong alcoholic drinks given them by their commanders as sources of their bravery. Some wore amulets on their necks and “hands for protection” against bullets. A discussant explained that he was given a talisman belt to wear around his waist which could hold him tight and become very hot when enemies were around. These good luck charms turned up to be fake; many fighters died or got wounded due to their belief in these charms. Other reasons cited as sources of their bravery are as follows:

- Colleagues made me brave
- AFL distributed the New Testament Bible
- God and the arm given to me
- The gun gave me power
- The urge to revenge for the killing of relatives

- American war movies
- Family members were not around, so fear left me when I joined.

The discussants narrated various ways in which they received wounds which led to their disability today. To wit:

- Mistake from friendly forces
- Enemy fire, on the frontline
- Aerial bombardment by Alpha Jet
- Personal mistake handling grenade
- Fell in enemy ambush.

Some of the other causes of wounds which resulted into amputation of limbs are directly reflective of the low level of training of the fighters as regards safe handling of weapons.

#### 4) *Did you commit atrocities yourself?*

Discussants admitted that they also committed atrocities in response to what others did to them and their people. They said that they killed and raped in revenge for what was done to their family members or relatives. They informed that they saw wickedness in the extremes such as disembowelling of pregnant women and using their intestines to intimidate other people at checkpoints. The discussants said that they burned houses and other people's properties because of anger. The discussants also admitted to beating people, looting goods and killing domesticated animals. Asked if they have any regrets for also committing crimes against others, a few said they do regret but most of them said no, as they were under the influence of drugs or were forced by their commanders. One discussant said that he did not do anything to anyone but only killed enemies on the battlefield.

#### 5) *Did you meet later your comrades or your victims?*

The participants said that they sometimes see their colleagues and those who commanded them during the war, most of them in same impoverished conditions as they are and sometimes even worse. These past commanders, they said, sometimes even asked for help from the disabled ex-combatants in this study: "Our former commanders feel more frustrated than us, because they have no more power to do anything or command other people to do something for them". Some met also their victims and begged them to forgive, others saw them on the street but were not given a chance to talk to them or even beaten in revenge.

#### 6) *What is your experience with the demobilization program after the war ended?*

The most contentious issue reference the transition from active combatants to civilian life was the Liberia *Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program (DDRR)* up to 2009. Nearly all of the discussants were not pleased with how it was handled. The vocational training to which some went was rather too short. They informed that they were promised packages at the end of the training which many of them did not receive. They said that their names were written down to be contacted when the packages were reading and up till now nothing has been done. A discussant informed that he entered the DDRR program and spent five days and afterwards used his ID (identification) card to enter a vocational institution where he spent nine months, graduating with a certificate but the tools given him and his colleagues did not match the certificate. A few others admitted that they sold their ID cards for money. According to discussants who fought for the warring factions, they are dissatisfied over how the government did not arrange a better package as that made for the regular soldiers when in their opinion all of them had served their country.

- USD 150 was given to rebel fighters as a one-shot resettlement package

- Government of Liberia soldiers were given USD540 and also benefited from appropriate pension arrangement.

7) *Where and how do you live now and how are you received by the community?*

Most of the disabled ex-combatants congregated in Monrovia and its immediate environs for fear of reprisal as stigma against them in their original communities is described as high. Most of them are blamed for the atrocities and the sufferings that the civilian population had to endure during the civil war. As a result the furthest distance from the city centre where most disabled are living turned out to be Careysburg and Gardnersville whereas the heaviest concentration is in Paynesville, all less than 50 km away. The discussants were frank to also admit that they were ashamed to return to their original places of residence. Furthermore the high cost of rent, distance from their usual places of street begging and the fact that there are some people in their original locals who want them to die, were cited as compelling reason for finding new places to live. Many of the fighters refused to go home even up to today.

Some participants were received well by their families but were rejected by their communities. One discussant said that his parents and other family members cried upon seeing him and later encouraged him not to harm himself. Another discussant said that reception was good at first after DDDR but when the money they received from the DDDR was exhausted he was thrown out. Yet another informed that he had a girl pregnant for him at time of disarmament but right after his money was finished too, she left him and said that the pregnancy was not his.

The psychological anguish and social marginalization ex-combatants have been subjected to have led some of them to attempt suicide. The suicidal inclinations among freshly-wounded ex-combatants were motivated by feelings of being useless after losing limbs, ashamed of their conditions, thinking that they would be rejected by women, being mocked by children or just share embarrassment at the disability. Asked why they did not carry out their desire to commit suicide after all, they gave the following reasons:

- Another disabled friend encouraged me not to kill myself
- I made my own decision not to kill myself
- Nurses at the hospital talked to me and promised me “false legs” after one year.

As a result of all these inconveniences, they move in groups and sleep in makeshift huts and market places where the night will find them after a hectic day of begging for alms from humanitarians in the street corners and in front of supermarkets and other public places.

**Figure 1. Disabled war combatants 1017**



8) *Are you satisfied with your living conditions and what are your expectations?*

The overwhelming majority of discussants indicated they are not satisfied with their present conditions, both physical and economic. However, they do accept the fact that their physical conditions in the given situation cannot be reversed, so they must live with it. They stated that “No one can be satisfied with this kind of condition, there is nothing we can do” (picture).

All the respondents felt that the DDDR was hastily planned and haphazardly implemented and that the implementation period of less than 3 years was grossly inadequate. Those who were enlisted in skills training programs were given 6 months to complete the training. They expected the program to last much longer to allow them acquire the knowledge and skills that are marketable. They expected the DDDR to provide free medical care and “We need housing and education for our children as well as jobs to move us from begging in the streets. We also need training to become peace ambassadors to reconcile our country and prevent war”.

9) *How did you as a women experience the civil war?Voices of Female Survivors*

“My son and his friend were hit when they went in our yard to get water from the well. I took them both to JFK Hospital and when I went to Front Street, I was hit too and my hand got broken. I was assisted by government security and ICRC; the Ministry of Finance gave me money to attend to my injury.”

“I was a student in grade seven in 1996 when I got shot entering into my own father’s house. The boy who shot me did it intentionally; five persons were also fired, 2 survived. I used tube for one year eight months.”

“I got hit also in 1996. They took me to Redemption Hospital. One ECOWAS man helped me and carried me to Ghana. I waited 9 month to remove the bullets. I lost one hand and foot.”

“I made many attempts to kill myself, each time I tried to do so someone would interrupt.”

“I did not go to school. I went to do business, when I got shot at the age of 23, only my mother stood by me, my boyfriend ran away.”

“I have had two children since my injury. One is going to school.”

“I am making and selling hand bags, neck ties, etc. Don Bosco taught me.”

“Particles are still in my body; they can be removed but someone has to foot the bill.”

“We need help. The government is not focused on the disabled.”

“We need micro-loan, wheel chairs and all disabled materials”

## **II. Perspectives of Key Informants**

During the study a number of key informants knowledgeable about the former fighters and the programs initiated for their return to civilian life were identified and interviewed. Their perspectives have been summarized below.

Among the views expressed by all key informants is the fact that there was not a dependable exit strategy for the thousands of ex-fighters especially those who became invalids from the war. It is not surprising therefore that disabled ex-combatants are finding it difficult to survive today. Having gained nothing from the war, physically impaired and not receiving any subsistence from government or other humanitarian organizations, the disabled ex-combatants civilians are the true victims of the Liberian civil war. The key informants feel that for all practical purposes the ex-combatants are marginalized by the Government of Liberia and rejected by the larger society.

### *1) The Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Program (DDRR):*

All the key informants dubbed the DDRR program as a long-term failure exercise, not only because of its failure to retrieve all the weapons from the ex-combatants but its inability to implement a program for providing sustainable basis for marketable life skills. They were unanimous on their fact that the DDRR program also lacked credible trauma healing offering as well as the availability of psychosocial counselling. It is the view of some key informants that the major reason standing in the way of true reintegration of ex-combatants is that the DDRR only put a quick-fix program that did little to prepare the ex-fighters for the life they were destined to face after disarmament.

### *2) Challenges facing ex-combatants:*

The current state of the disabled ex-combatants is appalling, their dependency on handouts to feed themselves and their dependents not guaranteed from day to day; hopelessness is written in their faces, said one key informant. Their presence in the streets begging for livelihood reminds those who carry hurt in their hearts from the civil war.

The informants generally believe that the provision of housing for disabled ex-combatants will not only dignify them and restore their self-esteem, but it will be easier to control or maintain them in any skilled training program that they may hereafter be given. They recommend skills training need assessment among disabled ex-combatants before any such training is initiated for them unlike the approach employed during the DDRR.

A key informant who happens to be a medical doctor confided that some of those who sustained bullet wounds in their bodies need follow-up treatment but they lack the means. If their exit strategy had been thoroughly planned, a referral program could have been in place to address such persons’ conditions. The need for access to free health care was discussed and emphasized.

### **SUMMARY OF SOME MAJOR FINDINGS**

- Most ex-combatants joined the fighting to protect themselves and their families who were targeted by rebel fighters
- Others joined to revenge the killing of close family members by fighters from all sides including government soldiers
- Some ex-combatants joined the fighting because they were tired of carrying looted materials or

ammunition for fighters through long distances

- Nearly all the former fighters interviewed expressed their desire to be trained in several areas of life skills
- A vast majority of the ex-combatants are living from begging in the streets.
- Several ex-combatants are concerned about the education of their children and are asking for educational support for them
- Ex-combatants want to serve as peace ambassadors and are requesting to be trained to serve as counsellors for other youths to deter them from engaging in violent activities and prevent war in this nation
- Those from factions feel that government cares for former AFL soldiers and discriminates those from other warring factions
- The lack of housing for ex-combatants with war related infirmities is of paramount concern to them
- The ex-combatants feel that the DDDR program did not achieve its objectives because it was poorly planned and implemented in the rush
- In the communities, they are stigmatized. They are blamed as people who brought suffering to their own people.
- They are denied job opportunities even when the job requires only elementary school knowledge
- They are discriminated against even by taxicabs especially if they carry crutches.
- The key informants are calling for establishment of trust fund for survivors of the civil war who are disabled.

### 3) *Strategic recommendations*

The ex-combatants, especially those who are disabled and had come from the warring factions, are no longer in the mathematics associated with post-war assistance to fighters. The National Bureau of Veterans Affairs caters exclusively to former Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) fighters. There is no provision for free medical service. The AFL still maintains a medical unit but does not have the mandate to give free treatment to disabled ex-fighters. An elaborate plan for the construction of a Veterans Hospital never got off the blueprint. Aside from their inability to provide basic needs for themselves, disabled ex-combatants as well as their civilian victims need support to upkeep and educate their children.

The need for conducting a census of those who became disabled by the war, ex-combatants as well as their victims, was underscored. Women in this category were in significant number and are grappling with life's challenges. Their leadership is calling for reparation for these innocent people and they have been advocating for this since the days of the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, enacted by the Parliament in 2005 but nothing has materialized. Some disabled could be trained to perform a variety of tasks for their sustenance and for the promotion of national peace and security. They could be prepared to serve as receptionists, ticket sellers for the LMA, the Liberia Marketing Association, at city parking services, car washers and the like.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Certainly an explorative investigation as presented here does not allow generalizing the results. However even the limited information collected indicates a major deficit in dealing with the sequelae of the Liberian civil war. The hardship imposed on the disabled by the very nature of their disabilities is exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for gainful employment to match their various forms of disabilities and skills, the uncertain source of daily meal and sometimes hostile attitude from some of the community members. This investigation, however underlines the need to execute a more representative study including

the disabled war veterans as well as their victims, a study which would allow representative data and their advanced qualitative and quantitative analysis. The present publication can only serve as a trigger.

Nevertheless the findings of the study demonstrate that the ex-combatants of the civil war and even more the disabled civilian victims are forgotten not only by the Government of Liberia, but also by aid agencies. The post-war status of the ex-combatants was not factored into the transitional arrangements such as the DDRR program for the combatants' return to civilian life confirming an earlier analysis of 2007 (6). If government and the nation at large continue to ignore the plight of these sizable population groups, the security of the nation will remain fragile (7) and national reconciliation will be elusive and unachievable.

*It is therefore recommended with priority that:*

- The government of Liberia revisits or reforms the National Bureau of Veteran Affairs to include the disabled ex-combatants of all former warring factions.
- The proposed Veterans Hospital be erected as planned to cater to the health needs of active service personnel, veterans of the civil war and disabled ex-combatants of former warring factions for whom no health service is available. While this is being done, it is recommended that the mandate of the AFL Medical Unit be expanded to provide free medical service to the disabled ex-fighters and war victims.
- A national census of disabled ex-combatants is executed, an imperative about peace building in the aftermath of the civil crisis. This exercise would provide a thorough needs assessment that will put into place client-responsive actions that promote peace building, reconciliation and inclusiveness of those who are disabled by the war either during active combat or civilians as a result of inadvertent explosions and wanton acts of cruelty (8).
- Arrangements be made for a minimal (financial) survival package for each disabled ex-combatant which can enable them to afford at least a meal a day so that they will be able to contribute to national peace and reconciliation efforts.

*Furthermore it is highly recommended that:*

- Some low cost housing arrangement be put into place for all disabled victims of the war.
- Carefully designed life skills training programs that are effective and efficient to make ex-combatants marketable or capable of sustaining themselves instead of begging in the streets.
- Continued education programs for ex-combatants who have dropped out of school due to lack of support and are desirous of learning be established.
- Scholarship programs and tuition support for children of war victims are put in place.

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