**Early Childhood Program (ECP): Summary Document of Portfolio Review 3rd October 2014**

**Present: Martin Woodhead (moderator), Tina Hyder (presenter), Aleesha Taylor (discussant), Massa Crayton (OSIWA), Chris Stone, Dan Sershen, Daphne Panayotatos, Laura Silber, Caitlin Hopping (OSF Fellow), Sarah Klaus and Elaine Harty.**

This ECP portfolio review focused on *(Re) building the Early Childhood System in Liberia*.

Tina Hyder introduced the review by describing how the Early Childhood Program (ECP) had been invited into Liberia at the request of the government following the support offered by George Soros to the new Presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Since the start of engagement late in 2007, ECP has worked in partnership with the Ministry of Education and OSIWA and has been instrumental in helping the government create early childhood frameworks and tools (e.g. a national policy, a children’s curriculum, a national training framework), each element of which contributes to forming a national early childhood system. For a relatively modest investment of approximately $1.4million over 7 years, ECP has supported systemic change in Liberia. Given the gaps in the system, technical assistance has been the key operational tool with some grant-giving. The importance of investing in building good professional relationships was highlighted as being central to any success, particularly given that government infrastructure is so poor in Liberia, as is typical of a fragile state. Two sets of grants were contrasted and lessons learned from each explored. The final questions posed were about whether we could have used the weight of OSF to challenge financial decisions made by international partners to the detriment of ECD in Liberia (both in the past and in the future), and secondly, to what extent do technical assistance initiatives like this fit well within OSF’s grant-making frameworks. It was noted that the Ebola crisis will impact on the programme going forwards.

Aleesha Taylor emphasised that OSF has strengths as a responsible technical partner, ability to engage with all players, plus a network of trusting relationships that other organisations do not enjoy. She pointed out that credit should be given to ECP for the creation of a dedicated ECD unit in the Ministry of Education in Liberia. Even though there may be financing issues there wouldn’t be the dialogue about ECD that now exists without OSF. The government now prioritises ECD. The balance of lobbying and technical work needs to be reflected upon to determine how to focus efforts going forward. Should ECD have been included in the original institutional funding priorities in Liberia, should we as an organisation insist that our priorities are paramount? This case stimulates reflection on the way that OSF works in response to national priorities. It’s a critical moment to consider how best to do this, particularly as OSF begins to consider engaging in education and early childhood work in Sierra Leone and Cote d’Ivoire.

Massa Crayton remarked that ECD has developed from a point of no documentation to now being formalised in the country. ECP took a cautious and detailed approach, although some gaps still exist because of changes of leadership in the ministry, but OSF has been successful in engaging other stakeholders, such as Save the Children, and the initiative has been picked up and endorsed by government. OSF has made some very good gains, improved standards and made strides in how people perceive ECD. Moving forwards OSF needs to solidify engagement; create more awareness at the national level of what ECD means, and ensure ECD is a priority in the education budget.

Martin Woodhead reinforced the point that from the perspective of the ECP Board progress in Liberia has been positive overall, despite the current situation regarding Ebola.

Chris noted that the materials were well presented and then raised the following general questions:

* Funding – there is a lot of naiveté in grant-making organisations regarding how OSF should use our power, should ECP have used its own weight to tackle government and donor funding issues and not think it could have relied on the wider organisation?
* Capacity - when did ECP imagine that there would be trainers and local capacity available? And how has that judgement changed? Could we have prepared better?
* OSF’s wider work in Liberia has been characterised as being top-down, so how did you build such a good relationship with OSIWA? What might OSF learn from this relationship?
* Finally, what would you have done differently if you now knew all that was going to happen from the outset, with the benefit of hindsight?

In response Tina noted that she would have made more efforts to convince funders and the government about the importance of ECD and thus try to secure more funding for the sector. Sarah added that the Ministry did have a vision of ECD initially, but didn’t consistently prioritize it, which was disenchanting as there was almost 1.8million USD potentially available at one point. Sarah and Massa also made broader points about the fact that network programs rely on OSIWA’s offices but that OSF should invest more in the office to help build continuity and relationships. Tina reflected that she thought capacity would be built sooner but because of the civil war, education for the majority of the population was interrupted and as a consequence, transformation of adults’ understanding of effective teaching and learning takes time.

Chris then asked if it is possible that ECP was trying to build training according to a model from countries that we are used to; might ECP have had a different model if it had not tried to recreate the Step by Step model? Tina responded that she came to the ECP without knowing Step by Step (SbS) but that the context in Liberia required the development of an approach and materials from first principles. Sarah added that the SbS experience was not used in Liberia as in the first instance we were dealing with a sector plan, eventually we did add a SbS trainer into the consultant group but our work in Eastern Europe did not influence what we did in Liberia.

Aleesha remarked that the government had made a commitment that they would provide free education to its citizens. One of the challenges for ECD is that it is usually distinct, as there are education and then ECD specialists, so there is a separation. Massa noted that at the time everything was overwhelming, the government took any help that came its way. Now ECD has been making small steps, developing capacity at the lower level, then working up. We have master trainers, we need to fund and base them permanently within the country. We ought to have technicians in the ministry who are not political appointees.

Chris then asked : Where are we today as the paper did not address this point directly?

This prompted a discussion about the response to Ebola with the eventual conclusion that we should recalibrate but not completely re-divert the program because of Ebola. Chris stressed that FOKAL in Haiti offered a good model by maintaining their on-going work post-earthquake and therefore kept the agenda moving and we should do the same.

Aleesha added a point about being able to act as a Foundation rather than as sectors in future and recommended that a review be undertaken of the National Foundation and its requirements in order to be in a position to present a Foundation wide perspective in future.

Chris raised some final points to consider:

* What about missing grantees? Is there someone we didn’t engage with that might have helped?
* Also, why would putting money into other donors help when it hasn’t before?
* A lot of our efforts in this are at a professional level - there has been no discussion of engaging religious organisations, the national constituency, local grassroots movements and building demand on the government.

In response, it was noted that other potential grantees such as BRAC would have required large scale funds to implement community based ECD services across the country, but the government would not have been in a position without a national ECD policy and other tools to oversee such expansion. Following some discussion, the issue about building grass-roots demand was highlighted as a particularly important adjustment to make to the strategy as work continues.