***Early Childhood Program: Portfolio review paper: Liberia: (re)building the Early Childhood System: 3rd October 2014***

***Introduction***

Within the Early Childhood Program’s (ECP) 2014 – 2017 strategy, the Liberia initiative falls under the *Concept: Promoting Equity Through Early Childhood*, which is part of the wider theme of *Building Societies for All: Using Early Childhood to Promote Equity and Social Cohesion*. The concept recognises the unique opportunities created by the Open Society Foundations’ (and sometimes George Soros’s) relationships with leaders to engage directly with governments to reform early childhood systems. The initiatives in Liberia and also Peru (the other country of focus for this concept, following completion of work in Bhutan and East Timor) have operated primarily through provision of intensive technical assistance to governments sometimes combined with capacity building and engagement of NGOs. The common feature of these programs is that governments have acknowledged the importance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) as a means to promote human development, and now wish to scale up and/or find new ways of delivering services and training. OSF is able to engage with all or selected aspects of a system, both as a responsive technical partner and as a donor.

The thrust of ECP’s programming in Liberia has been to make a significant contribution to (re)building the early childhood system after the collapse of services provoked by the civil war, which ended in 2006. With limited experience to build on from before the war, efforts have been directed towards creating an early childhood system from first principles, drawing where possible on pre-war services for young children. ECP has been able to capitalise on knowledge gained through earlier systems building work in Eastern and Central Europe and has transferred that experience to inform the initiative, as appropriate, in Liberia. ECP has therefore prioritised support for those fundamental elements of systems building such as establishing legal and policy frameworks; securing adequate investment; creating professional development and training systems; and introducing child centred approaches, parental involvement and education. Expenditure has been $1,450,000 approximately from the inception of activities in 2008 to date.

Several factors have contributed to the initiative and are of note. An important contextual aspect of the work from the outset has been the willingness (or not) of the government and international donors and financing mechanisms to adequately invest in early childhood development. ECP has both played a pivotal role in attempting to work with the government to secure greater and more predictable funding for early childhood, but has also filled in the gaps when donor interest has failed. Additionally, in the light of inevitable political changes (three Ministers of Education have been in office since the inception of ECP’s work in 2007/8, resulting in regular re-organisation of key Ministry staff), ECP’s staff and consultant continuity and commitment to creating strong professional relationships has been essential. An unusual facet of ECP’s engagement in Liberia has been the dedication and longevity of the two lead technical consultants who have worked with a personal passion, commitment and energy beyond what can be reasonably expected, with measurable impacts. Indeed, a red thread of good professional relationships based on trust and delivery of results runs through the work in Liberia and while perhaps not a readily controlled precondition of success for a donor and grant maker, trusting relationships have been central to any success that has been achieved. Finally, the initiative has been underpinned by a mutually beneficial partnership between OSIWA and ECP and good co-operation with ESP. Not all of the above has been without difficulty though, and obstacles and the resulting learning will be explored throughout the course of the review.

ECP is now seven years into a planned decade (2008 – 2017) of work in Liberia, and looking forwards to strategy planning in the first half of 2015. It is an optimal time to review the strategic approach and timeline in Liberia taking into account the Ebola crisis, which is ravaging the country.

***Original ambitions***

A team from the Early Childhood Program made its first assessment visit to Liberia late in 2007. The visit was in response to a request from the Ministry of Education in Liberia, prompted by George Soros’ support for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in her new role as President, following her election in 2005 when she became the first woman elected as head of state in Africa. Since 2007/08, the overarching vision of ECP’s work in Liberia has been to enable access to quality early childhood provision for every child in Liberia. The specific goal for engagement in partnership with the Ministry of Education, as the lead Ministry for early childhood, was and remains: ***‘To develop ECD capacity in Liberia across different sectors, to solidly embed ECD priorities into funded sector plans, to improve quality of preschool and other center-based provisions, and to pilot and evaluate community-based models.’***ECP’s role can therefore be characterised as catalytic, as an enabler for the government.The primary tools for systems building have been technical assistance coupled with some grant-making to international and local organisations.

The operational model for ECP’s work in Liberia is to use various tools to stimulate the creation of a viable national early childhood system to achieve the stated goal. Areas of activity (see Annexes 1 and 2 for additional details) have in the past and currently include:

1. Advocacy and Policy: Provision of technical experts (whose costs were shared with the World Bank) to co-ordinate and write a **multi-sectoral, national early childhood development policy**, which was finally adopted in 2013. Earlier situation studies were also funded by ECP and then formed the basis of the early childhood policy and earlier chapter on ECD in the 10 year Education Sector Plan, which is guiding investments in education. The focus now is on implementation of the early childhood policy.
2. Donor engagement: Advocating with and on behalf of the Ministry of Education to secure appropriate **investment** (from the government of Liberia as well as other donors) to fund early childhood services. This has led to engagement with the World Bank to secure funds under the Global Partnership for Education, with discussions in place with foundations including Elma Philanthropies to explore options for scale up.
3. Capacity building: Building the **technical knowledge and skills** of the people/leaders charged with taking forwards the national early childhood policy and expansion of the service through scholarships, study tours and mentoring which is an ongoing process using highly experienced technical consultants working as a team. ECP with OSIWA has also seconded two local early childhood experts to work as trainers and mentors with the Ministry of Education.
4. Systems building: Development of the **national training and professional development** system for early childhood with associated training materials and elaboration of the national delivery system for dissemination of training across the country. Courses have been written, piloted and revised by a national stakeholder group, supported by the international consultants, and training is now being rolled out nationally. The first level of training is a parenting education course which is also proving to be a good introduction to child development for teachers, carers, local government officials and community leaders.
5. Innovation/new services: Providing grants to national and international organisations to develop **demonstration sites** to illustrate good child-centered practice in the community and in public school settings as a stimulus for wider change, which the consultant team (both international and local) has been instrumental in designing and then using to train larger groups of practitioners (see Annexe 5 for details of recent video about one demonstration site).
6. Early education reform: Aiding the government through consultant support to co-create essential tools such as the **national children’s curriculum** (and associated materials and supporting children’s books) for early childhood and then embedding training on the curriculum into the training materials and dissemination program mentioned above.
7. Higher education reform: Building capacity in the **higher education sector**, through an institutional partnership with a US based institution, Bank Street College, to eventually develop undergraduate and post-graduate courses in early childhood development (none exist at present) in order to grow the leaders and technical experts who will work in and ensure the sustainability of the sector.

***Relevant contextual challenges***

Investment (or lack of investment) in the national early childhood sector and changes in the political environment and the subsequent effects on the people and priorities of the Ministry of Education, have been the major contextual issues of note.

1. Investment in ECD

In 2007, the newly-elected government sought to resurrect the education system but lacked the financing to do so. Consequently, a request for catalytic funding was submitted to an international financing mechanism, the Education For All – Fast Track Initiative (EFA\_FTI) Partnership[[1]](#footnote-1). Admission to the Partnership was granted but financing was denied, Liberia being the first country denied funds. Instead, a small group of partners, led by UNICEF ($12 million) and OSF ($4.25), created a pooled fund to meet the immediate needs outlined in the Liberia Primary Education Recovery Program (LPERP), a 3-year Action Program aimed at putting primary education back on track after years of functioning on an ad-hoc emergency basis following the end of the civil war in 2003. Though more than half of the enrolled primary school population was attending kindergarten grades (K1, K2) incorporated within primary schools, LPERP intentionally limited investment to grades 1 and up, largely a result of the global movement to ensure universal primary education, created by the first MDGs.

A request to enhance capacity in ECD was also included in the proposal to the Education Program Development Fund (a second more flexible trust fund specifically for policy development) of the EFA-FTI. ECP worked with James E. Roberts, then Deputy Minister of Planning at the Ministry of Education, who wrote to the EFA-FTI Secretariat in 2010 stating that:

*‘…the Ministry of Education in Liberia has consistently prioritized development of its youngest citizens and momentum around ECD is building up in the country. Given the dire circumstances of children in Liberia, we believe it is important to leverage complementary World Bank and OSI sources of expertise and funding in order to build our capacity and significantly improve the situation of young children. We sincerely hope that Liberia can be included in the new World Bank capacity-building program’* (Roberts to EFA-FTI Secretariat, 2010)*.*

The application was successful. ECD subsequently became a major component in the Liberian Ten-Year National Education Plan, supported by the EFA-FTI Catalytic Fund grant of 2010. Initially, after lobbying by the government and ECP, $1million was allocated to ECD from the Catalytic Fund over the three-year period from 2010 to 2013, with an additional $800,000 also being proposed following further lobbying. Funds were earmarked for a range of analytical and technical tasks including development of an early childhood strategy and implementation plan for the national ECD policy. Funding was also included to develop program and pedagogical standards, regulations for ECD provision, a national curriculum and for development of low-cost play and learning materials. Elaboration of a national training and certification program and the development of eight pilot sites in rural areas were also initially included.

However, what happened next is illustrative of the rapid change that can occur when working with governments and multi-lateral donors, and indeed highlights how unpredictable such partnerships can be. Although the MoE had selected priorities for ECD in discussion with a range of education partners, when education funding to Liberia was re-negotiated in 2011, funding initially secured for ECD was reduced to support for just eight pilot sites (to a value of $50,000 per site) and the development of plans to implement the ECD policy and standards. It is worth noting that although funding was supposed to end in 2013, at the time of writing only four of the eight pilot sites are under construction, and have been beset by delays.

Why did early childhood lose vital funding? On the one hand, a reduction in the overall budgets available through the Catalytic Fund (CF) provides the most straightforward explanation, and a number of other areas in education apart from ECD experienced cuts. However, on the other hand, it appeared that funds could be shifted away easily from ECD, as it was believed that other donors, specifically UNICEF, would fill the gaps that removal of the CF would create. Anecdotally, UNICEF had claimed that they were about to benefit from significant multi-million dollar funds for ECD, and as a direct consequence, the allocation for ECD was reduced within the CF as the fund was restructured. Once it became apparent that the UNICEF funds were not forthcoming, it was too late to rescind the decision, and the task team leader from the World Bank later expressed deep personal regret that early childhood had ‘lost out’.

ECP in the end stepped in to fill some of the gaps when CF funds were withdrawn. The availability, however, of funders such as ECP should not remove the imperative for major international financing initiatives such as GPE committing extensive and meaningful support to ECD.ECP has learned from the Liberian experience to continue to lobby internationally for increased investment in ECD, and as a result of sustained pressure from the ECD field, ECD now features more frequently in GPE funding plans. A more basic question is whether ECP could have done more to oppose the reduction in CF funding, or from an even earlier stage, ensure that ECD was integral to the OSF contribution when the pooled fund was conceived.

2) Political changes

The political environment has also been subject to change. On entry into Liberia in 2007, Dr.Joseph Korto was the Minister of Education, backed by a strong team of Deputy Ministers, particularly Deputy James Roberts in the planning section, who had pushed for investment in ECD. In 2010, Dr. Korto was replaced by Othello Gongar, who had been an OSF technical adviser, and an advocate for ECD, and who was then subsequently replaced by Etmonia Tarpeh in 2012, shortly following Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s re-election as President in 2011. Each Minister has brought in new personnel at the level of Deputy Minister and by default this has impacted on early childhood development, which is dealt with at the third tier of administration, that is, at the level of Assistant Minister. The current Minister of Education is very welcoming of ECP input and activities, but seems unable to leverage funding for the sector.

The changes in Minister are illustrative of a common experience when working with governments, the positive point in Liberia being that successive Ministers have been broadly supportive of plans for ECD and the overall goals of the program have remained. This is not the case in Peru, where a change of Minister has led to a reshaping of the technical assistance program that ECP had been supporting. However, once Presidential elections take place in Liberia, planned for 2017, it will be interesting to assess how OSF is regarded as a partner, having been so closely identified with the present incumbent.

At the technical level in the Ministry, in 2007, the ECD focal point and subsequent leader of the unit was Yukhiko Amnon, an individual with a strong commitment to ECD, being also a good political operator within the Ministry, but lacking in deep early childhood and administrative knowledge. ECP funded her to successfully complete a distance-learning post-graduate course in ECD (with a focus on building capacity in Africa). Amnon led the MoE’s ECD unit from the beginning, only very recently leaving, following the appointment of a permanent Assistant Minister. The new Assistant Minister, Felicia Doe-Sumah, is a committed and effective individual and is working closely with ECP consultants, and the unit now has formal status as a Bureau of Early Childhood. The Ministry has picked up payment of staff salaries (which had previously been supplemented by ECP) apart from one post in the Bureau which is currently funded by UNICEF as part of their recent commitment to support ECD.

***Advances or setbacks, specific grants as key examples***

Grant-making has been a secondary mode of operation in Liberia for ECP with technical assistance being the primary means of providing the necessary inputs for systems building. Grants awarded by ECP/OSIWA in early childhood fall into a few distinct categories: 1) grants to international institutions working in Liberia (Bank Street College, Save the Children) 2) grants to large/medium Liberian institutions (Tubman University, We-Care NGO) and 3) small grants (under $10,000) to support pilot projects based in modest Liberian NGOs. Though grant-making to Liberian organizations is the preferred model, grants to larger international organizations have contributed to creating a strong foundation for the sector in partners who are able to leverage additional resources and draw in wider technical experience.

To illustrate the complexity of grant-making in Liberia, two grants to larger organizations are highlighted. One (Save the Children) proved quite successful, while the second (Tubman University) did not and led to a move away from grant-making towards a strategy of provision of more extensive technical assistance.

First for consideration is a series of three grants to **Save the Children** in Liberia to establish three community based ECD centres. The grants ran from December 2010 to May 2014 for a total of $298,913. In summary, Save the Children Liberia was selected for the partnership, partly because the other comparable agency, Plan International which also had an interest in ECD at the time of review of potential grantees in 2009/10, was experiencing a change of leadership due to discovery of a fraud, which led to the Country Director being unable to leave the Plan compound for fear of retaliation. Save the Children had been in country for many years with a strong operational team, experienced in health, education and protection initiatives working across several counties, and with a history of effective community engagement. The overarching aim with the grants to Save the Children was to explore and capture how to engage communities in building, running and implementing low cost community based services for children, as a means to provide a costed model for the government to aid any future expansion plans. While there were some local difficulties with implementation (regarding handover of management to communities, quality of the buildings and initially the quality of childcare) overall, the gains have been positive. The most important being that Save the Children leveraged additional funds from other donors to build and develop an additional six ECD centres across the country. Moreover, Save the Children, as well as training local government officials in ECD, also responded to community demands to engage local schools in the transformation of services for the youngest children in the kindergartens and early grades of primary schools (often located in close proximity to the new community centres). This has been achieved by training teachers in new child-centred approaches and by tackling the issue of over-age children in kindergarten classrooms, by setting up parallel alternative classes. Save the Children also managed to leverage its own technical support to improve quality and in addition has become one of the strongest in country advocates for ECD, and is a trusted partner of the Ministry. The last OSF grant ended mid-2014 and it remains to be seen how Save the Children continues the legacy and capitalises on the expertise it has developed in the sector.

The second grant under consideration is one to Tubman University, which is located in the south-east of Liberia in Harper, Maryland on the border with Cote d’Ivoire. This grant of $70,318, made in 2011 (with the intention that it would be renewed), has not been a success and is proving difficult to close. The primary purpose of the grant was to build the capacity of a reputable institute of higher education to cultivate a good ECD faculty; develop and operate a range of courses (certificate, diploma and undergraduate) and initiate associated services such as a laboratory school for early childhood development, with a view to becoming a national center of excellence. The faculty would then lead a nationwide expansion of courses in higher education to be placed in other university departments across the country. Tubman University was selected as the best higher education partner for a variety of reasons. One was direction from the then Minister of Education towards the University as a good resource given its proximity to one of the three national teacher training colleges at Webbo. It was argued that Tubman could be a conduit for early childhood lecturers to then staff the teacher training college which the Minister had suggested would become a specialist institute for early childhood development. Another factor was the leadership of the President of the University, who having been based in the US was a persuasive advocate for ECD and made a lucid and very believable case for investing in her institution, which had been awarded university status in 2009. Her supporting staff team was also impressive and at the time the investment was believed to be sound.

The issues that befell the grant were perhaps predictable in hindsight. The first failure was the difficulty in recruiting appropriately qualified staff to develop the faculty. Many of the academic team across the university are retired university teachers, originally from the US, committed to help rebuild the academic base of the country. The reality of living a deeply rural environment with intermittent electricity, limited internet access, few resources and very basic staff accommodation proved too much for many, and staff turnover has been high. The onset of conflict in Cote d’Ivoire in 2011 also added to concerns about political stability and safety, so many staff did not stay as long as intended. From the perspective of the emerging department of early childhood, the lead faculty member while tremendously well intentioned did not have the skills or experience to develop a university department. Another blow was that the President of the University experienced ill-health and had to leave the country, and was not able to exercise the leadership and direction that had been expected. In addition, the promised stipends as announced by President Johnson Sirleaf, for university enrolment did not materialise, so student numbers were initially low. In addition, the distance of the university from Monrovia (2 days by car on poor roads, which are not passable in the rainy season) made monitoring and technical support highly challenging. Furthermore, lack of finance and administrative staff in the university has made the provision of credible financial reports quite challenging and ECP is still waiting for a final report of expenditure.

All the above led to a rethink of how to engage with the Higher Education sector and in 2012, Bank Street College was identified as a credible provider of technical assistance. The College has mapped the national context and until the recent Ebola outbreak was working with the National Higher Education Commission and a select group of national universities to develop plans for creation of associate level courses in ECD. This approach seems to be working.

Model of technical assistance

Given the lack of ECD expertise in Liberia in terms of institutions and also individuals, it was apparent that external technical assistance was needed from the outset. However, learning from experience from previous work in Europe, it was evident that international consultants should, wherever possible, work alongside and transfer skills and knowledge to local ECD professionals. Given the close historical and political ties between the US and Liberia, the international consultants have in the main come from the US. Over the years of engagement in Liberia there has been a cast of external consultants from the first international consultant team of two that worked alongside local consultants to produce the initial 3 part situation analysis to a Step by Step NGO director from Ukraine who assisted with the development of the curriculum.

The current long-term technical consultant group, comprises Professor Faith Lamb Parker and her team from Bank Street College (also involving staff from Howard University) and Barbara Ferguson Kamara, an ECD leader and administrator from the US, with experience of developing national systems[[2]](#footnote-2) and as a Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia in the 1960’s. Both Lamb Parker and Ferguson Kamara have been in place since 2010, and have worked in a highly effective co-ordinated manner to deliver MoE/ECP/OSIWA objectives. The overall model is that Bank Street is responsible for developing technical tools with the Ministry of Education such as the training framework, training materials, the children’s curriculum and now has a focus on higher education; while Ferguson Kamara has focused more on implementing the ECD policy, administration, planning and budgetary aspects of the ECD system. However, each is able to reinforce the work of the other.

The two lead consultants have been instrumental in identifying potential leaders and designing study visit experiences and then mentoring Liberian talent. There is now a pool of 10 - 15 ECD experts in Liberia, drawn from a range of agencies across the country, who are the emerging leaders in the sector. They are called upon by the Ministry to deliver training and provide support and expertise as kindergarten classrooms are transformed across the country. More significantly, the consultant team has mentored two Liberian ECD professionals who now work with OSIWA, but are on secondment to the MoE, to work as national trainers. One of the risks in the above is that if either of the lead consultants decides to retire, they will be hard to replace, however, the involvement of a wider team from Bank Street, including the recent use of graduate students as trainers is going some way to mitigating that risk. However, it has to be said that the personal commitment to make a difference for young children in Liberia means that the benefits of the initiative extend way beyond the terms of the consultant contracts.

Since co-ordination and good communication is essential to the initiative the over-arching working model comprises meetings with the MoE, generally at the end of the year to review the previous year’s activities, identify priorities for the coming year and plan the key events (and associated budgets). Other actors such as UNICEF are also consulted. These meetings involve the consultant team, OSIWA and ECP. Regular review meetings are then held throughout the year. The consultant team are in regular communication with the MoE and OSIWA in the interim. The consultants visit Liberia between three to six times a year, sometimes visits overlap or are in sequence, but each trip builds on the work of previous teams. ECP aims to be in country two to three times a year, and maintains regular communications with OSIWA and the consultant.

***OSF contribution to changes and how did it manifest. Other key players & what role did they play?***

On arrival in Liberia in 2007, ECP quickly became one, if not the leading development partner in the early childhood sector. ECP’s contributions have been based on the first principle of partnership with government, with time invested from the outset, to understand the priorities (sometimes competing) of the Ministry of Education and then providing excellent technical support in a flexible and responsive manner. Although at times it may have been faster to produce training tools, materials and resources outside the country; the participatory process of constructing training materials, piloting & revising collectively, running writing workshops and producing tools and plans has both built understanding and ownership, and ensured that materials and plans will be used in the longer-term. Work with the Ministry is still characterized by lack of forward planning and poor administrative procedures, on their side, but this is slowly changing.

There have been two draft MoUs that have guided the relationship between ECP, OSIWA and the MoE, but with each change in administration it has been difficult to hold different players to account via the MoUs, although they have been useful reference documents. Currently, a MoU exists between OSIWA and the MoE, with costs of training managed locally using OSIWA procurement guidance and approval systems.

In terms of other players, although from OSF’s arrival in 2007, UNICEF was the lead development partner for education, as identified by the government, UNICEF had no capacity and little interest in developing the early childhood system; stating very publically that the primary system required immediate attention, despite the fact that the evidence consistently demonstrates that quality pre-primary experiences provide an essential foundation for success and retention in primary education. UNICEF’s position ultimately illustrates the fact that in a decentralized international agency, individual officers command huge influence over country priorities. Once those officers change, priorities often change. The question for ECP is whether we could or should have challenged this stance from the outset, not just in personal exchange but also using the highest connections that OSF could muster. Five years later on in the story of early childhood development in Liberia, UNICEF’s unfulfilled promises to secure funding led yet again to a loss of international investment via the EFA-FTI CF in the sector, and it is only in the last year that the organization has acknowledged its lack of activity and is now actively working with ECP and the Ministry. UNICEF is aiming to fund ECD activities to the tune of approximately $150,000 in 2014, and is building on ECP initiated activities by, for instance, funding the roll out of training and printing copies of the national curriculum for national distribution.

Other interested, but not well resourced partners at the time of arrival in Liberia in 2007 included, PLAN International which had prioritized ECD, but did not secure funding to follow through its intentions. BRAC was also interested in providing at scale community early childhood services as it had done in other countries, but again failed to secure the funding needed for nationwide expansion. Subsequently, neither organization has been very active in the sector.

The partnership with World Bank has been on the whole positive. It’s worth noting that a member of ECP’s early childhood team from 2007 joined the World Bank’s ECD Africa Initiative in 2008, and was a key contact as funding for ECD in Liberia was negotiated under the terms of the EFA-FTI, since the Bank was the supervising entity for the funds. Subsequently, there have been fast changing technical and country leads with an interest in ECD. Liberia has recently reemerged as a country of interest for the Bank under the Africa focused Early Learning Development Partnership and ECP is currently in dialogue with the team as plans are developed.

The role of the OSIWA office has been instrumental in contributing to any successes the program has experienced. From 2010, the presence of Massa Crayton as Education Officer (now also acting Country Officer) has ensured continuity and an analytic perspective on changes in the Ministry and operating environment. Moreover, the practical and administrative support provided by the office cannot be underestimated. This is manifest in terms of administering grants for the Ministry of Education, community groups and also for payments for local consultants, as well as logistical support to host consultant teams and help to the Ministry to properly administer training events. OSIWA’s procurement standards have provided a helpful precedent for the Ministry.

Finally, ESP continues to be an ongoing source of information and advice as the personality politics in the Ministry have played out. Through the ESP funded consultants placed in the planning department of the Ministry of Education, ECP has been able to gather information or understand political undercurrents in greater depth. More recently, ECP and ESP have awarded a joint grant to a national organisation, We-Care, which is delivering teacher training for reading and writing for critical thinking and is working across the age-range, now aiming to include strategies for young children. The joint funding from ESP and ECP will ensure continuity of approach and ease of reporting for the organisation.

***What recalibrations are required going forward?***

The Ebola outbreak is going to require a rethink of what is possible both short and long-term in Liberia. It is very hard to know when the country will return to normal and what impact the virus will have had on the Government and specifically the Ministry of Education’s ability to transform the early childhood system. From outside the country, it appears as if one of the primary effects of the virus has been the increased erosion of trust in public services, which was already low. Trust and belief in institutions such as community centers and schools as places where a multitude of services could benefit young children and their families, were essential components of the vision to (re)build the ECD system. A great deal of work may be needed to instil trust in public services in the future.

An exciting development for 2014/2015 had been the hosting of the *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* initiative in the OSIWA offices in Liberia. *What to Expect* is an education program for expectant parents. The *Big Belly Business* team, as *What to Expect* is known in Liberia, had been looking for a sympathetic institutional partner with an interest in parenting and early childhood development. Funding of approximately $500,000 for two years from the US State Department has been secured by OSIWA to host the initiative which works through the midwifery system with a focus on parents and children under the age of three, and is therefore adding a complementary set of activities to the current ECP focus on pre-school. It remains to be seen if the Ebola outbreak will impact on the initiative.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, ECP had envisaged scaling back activities from 2017, following 10 years of what can be described as ‘heavy lifting’ to work towards the original goal: ***‘To develop ECD capacity in Liberia across different sectors, to solidly embed ECD priorities into funded sector plans, to improve quality of preschool and other center-based provisions, and to pilot and evaluate community-based models.’***

A formal evaluation of what has been achieved to date, as a means to inform what happens in future is/was on the agenda for late 2014. Earlier in 2014, ECP commissioned a photo-story and short video of one of the demonstration sites as a means to illustrate the human face of systems development (see annexes 5 & 7). A formal review is now required but until that evaluation takes place the informal assessment of success against the identified goal is as follows:

***… to develop ECD capacity in Liberia across different sectors …***ECD capacity remains essentially within the education sector, although the adoption of the national Early Childhood Policy by nine other Ministries indicates high level support for the concept of integrated services. The Ministry of Health has also made progress with reductions in infant and maternal mortality. On the ground, in at least some instances, health clinics have worked alongside pilot ECD sites (one of Save the Children’s successes) to encourage parents to ensure children are vaccinated and to transmit messages about basic health and hygiene as a preventative measure.

***…to solidly embed ECD priorities into funded sector plans…*** ECD is not currently reflected as a priority in funding plans, even within the national education budget. Although, ECP’s contribution to date has been to generate the tools and frameworks that form the backbone of a good ECD system, the priority for the coming period must be to work with the government and other development partners to generate sufficient investment to fund the ECD system. This systems building work necessitates roll-out of a comprehensive training program for teachers and carers, with associated mentoring; roll-out of parent training; renovation and resourcing of child-centred classrooms; developing the higher education sector and securing high level political and public support for ECD services. One of ECP’s planned activities for 2015 had been a financing and costing study to help the Ministry plan effectively for the above. It remains to be seen if this will go ahead.

***… to improve quality of preschool and other center-based provisions…to pilot and evaluate community-based models…***

The creation of 5 pilot sites in community settings with additional plans to support the MoE to transform classrooms in 4 public schools has provided a solid start on the journey to improve quality. Bank Street College has developed an ECD quality assessment tool (Global Ratings of Environments – GROE) which has been adapted and piloted in Liberia and a number of Ministry officials and ECD trainers have been trained to use the tool. The tool is one of the first of its kind in Liberia and provides an opportunity for teachers and carers with limited training to understand both what constitutes a quality service and more importantly what they can do to make improvements.

More generally, the ongoing training programs, based around first principles of child development and the national children’s curriculum, are continuing to build the knowledge and skills of ECD practitioners and teachers but it is the efforts to embed training in the teacher training colleges and higher education system that will sustain the inputs developed to date. Work in all the areas above will continue with emphasis on embedding training and academic courses in ECD within the teacher training colleges and universities.

In conclusion, the proposed next steps for the initiative, pending understanding of the full impact of Ebola, are as follows:

OSF (led by ECP, but with management support) will increase substantially engagement with international donors in the UK, S. Africa, US (WB, UNICEF, CIFF, USAID, ELMA) to actively secure donor funding to build the ECD sector. The planned partnership with Elma Philanthropies offers an excellent opportunity to maximise and direct resources effectively in an effort to assist with scale-up.

ECP will be linking Liberia investments/projects strongly with our emerging work across Africa, which will be prioritising building networks and developing stronger departments of higher education for early childhood. The model institutional partnering in Liberia will inform the development of plans to strengthen the higher education sector in other parts of the region.

ECP is likely to continue with the model of technical assistance as the preferred tool of operation, at the same time as maintaining efforts to find opportunities for grant-making, particularly with local organisations where appropriate.

ECP has been informally approached to share tools and approaches with the World Bank, which is working in Sierra Leone on developing the early childhood system. An extremely recent potential opportunity has emerged in discussions with the government of Cote d’Ivoire as it seeks to strengthen its health and education systems, within with early childhood is seen as a key component.

1. The Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) was launched in 2002 as a global partnership to accelerate progress towards the Education for All (EFA) goal of universal completion of primary education for girls and boys by 2015. To support that goal, the Catalytic Fund (CF) was established in 2003 to provide transitional funding to low-income countries for up to three years. The principles of the Catalytic Fund were revised in 2007 to ensure more predictable and longer-term financial support to countries with endorsed Education Sector Plans (ESP). It was under the auspices of the Fast Track Initiative that the Government of Liberia applied for funding to reconstruct the education system, within which early childhood development was also eventually considered a key component. The Global Partnership for Education replaced EFA-FTI in 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ferguson Kamara ran the ECD system in Washington DC as well as the US Head Start program at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under the Carter administration [↑](#footnote-ref-2)