Coexistence and Transitional Justice in Liberia:
Identified Obstacles and Opportunities for Action

Since early 2007 Coexistence International has engaged with representatives of West African civil society, governments, and regional and international bodies to strengthen coexistence in the region. The project has critically examined the intersection of transitional justice, democracy, human rights, and coexistence. This work has included workshops, publications, and research that addressed these issues in several countries in the region including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

As part of this project CI, in partnership with the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and the Transitional Justice Working Group in Liberia (TJWG), convened a coexistence training, “Strengthening Coexistence and Transitional Justice in Liberia” from November 4-6, 2009.

The training was motivated by joint discussions between CI, ICTJ, TJWG, and practitioners working in the areas of governance, peacebuilding, and transitional justice in Liberia and throughout the region. These practitioners articulated that their work could be enhanced through a deeper, more holistic approach to social inclusion and through gaining a more international perspective on coexistence. It was based on this identified need that CI, ICTJ, and TJWG developed the workshop Strengthening Coexistence and Transitional Justice in Liberia.

The main objective of the training was to strengthen participants’ understanding of a coexistence lens and how to use such a lens within a framework of transitional justice in Liberia. The training was also designed as a forum to share experiences and learn lessons from practitioners from other countries within the sub-region.

The training was held at Thinker’s Village Retreat Center in Monrovia, Liberia, and brought together 20 individuals representing Liberian civil society, local government, and government bodies.

An important component of the training was identifying obstacles to social inclusion in Liberia within the context of its transitional justice process. Participants then identified specific actions to address those obstacles and opportunities to advocate for socially inclusive policies, processes, and/or structures.

This document summarizes, as defined by workshop participants, obstacles to coexistence in Liberia; the links between transitional justice and coexistence; and the specific actions and opportunities for advocacy that can lead to strengthened coexistence in Liberia. It is the organizers’ hope that this summary will prove to be a useful tool for practitioners in Liberia, whatever their field of practice or their type of interest in transitional justice in the country. We also hope this summary will help identify coexistence obstacles and develop or identify ongoing programs to address them. Finally, we hope it will also be a useful reference for the global community of those working in the fields of social inclusion, transitional justice, human rights, and good governance.

Further information on this workshop and additional resources on the relationship between coexistence and democracy, transitional justice, human rights, security, and other areas are available from CI online at www.coexistence.net
Obstacles to Coexistence and Social Inclusion in Liberia

I) Divisions in society that lead to the lack of acceptance of some groups by others

These divisions can be:

i) Tribal
   For example, Mandingoes aren’t accepted in certain areas of broader Liberian society;

ii) Religious
   For example, Muslims and Christians do not often integrate and many distrust each other;

iii) Gender-based
   For example, women are often excluded from decision-making processes.

II) Questions of Liberian identity

Some question whether Congos and Americos are “real” Liberians, and though Mandingoes have been present in Liberia for centuries, many believe they are recent migrants to Liberia and thus also not “real” Liberians.

III) Breakdown of family values

Some parents feel disrespected by their children. In some cases, youth have become the bread winners of their family, causing them to disavow the values their parents try to teach them. This lack of basic family values and respect is carried by youth into broader society. Parents are perceived by some youth to have played a role in family breakdown by compelling children to take care of themselves and to learn or copy from the experience of people outside the family.

IV) Lack of trust between youth and older generations

Liberian youth hold their elders accountable for the activities of the civil war and the unmet challenges to repairing the damage it caused.

V) Land disputes

Examples include the violent land disputes between the people of Rock Town and Wetochen in Maryland; the Charles Bennie and Roland Kaine land saga in Margibi county, and several land disputes in Montserrado county.

There are many disputes over proper land ownership, yet the systems in place to resolve these disputes are inadequate. It is also perceived to be unfair that some organizations and individuals own large tracts of land while many people own none.

VI) The class system

People in power try to promote a class system based on social status or political position. This system marginalizes those of lower socio-economic status to the benefit of elites. For example, former President William Tubman’s open door policy, centered on “humanistic capitalism,” is perceived to have benefitted foreign nationals and the Liberian political and economic elite rather than broader Liberian society.

VII) Divisive legal instruments

Examples include exclusionary clauses of the constitution related to citizenship and the rights of the disabled to hold high office.
III) Lack of human capacity and knowledge of the law among cross sections of the society.

For example, many Liberians are not aware of their basic civil and political rights; government officials sometimes prey on this weakness of the citizenry.

IX) Naming systems

Native names versus Congo/Americo names contribute to marginalization. Names serve as identity markers that maintain social divides.

X) Breakdown of traditional and cultural values

There is a tension between modern and Western values and the traditional Liberian values, which both exist within contemporary Liberian society.

XI) Exclusion of individuals from decision making at community and traditional levels

This commonly occurs on the basis of age, gender, tribe, etc.

XII) Justice system capacities are limited

People do not trust the judicial and law enforcement systems, which are viewed as biased, corrupt, and lacking capacity to lead. In this atmosphere, justice is rarely achieved. In addition, law enforcement agencies do not respect nor enforce human rights.

XIII) Distrust of state entities and their ability to model and support family values

For example, some politicians/people of affluence pursue extra-marital affairs and other immoral activities.

XIV) Pervasive corruption among government officials

XV) Limited use of vernacular Liberian English by institutions

When government, international bodies, civil society, etc. do not communicate in the vernacular, this can leave a large segment of society overlooked. As a result, these institutions' messages fail to reach many people.

XVI) Religious discrimination

Despite being officially secular, Liberian society and government widely support Christian traditions and values both implicitly and explicitly, while the traditions and values of non-Christians (mainly Muslims) are ignored. For example, the government officially recognizes Christian holidays, but does not recognize any other religious holidays.

After participants identified these 16 obstacles to coexistence in Liberia, the workshop facilitators organized the obstacles into five broader categories: Class & Ethnic Divisions; Religious Divides; Breakdown of Cultural Values & Norms; Land Disputes; and Identity, Governance, and the State. Participants then worked in small groups according to the five categories and identified activities and/or advocacy goals that would address the obstacles to social inclusion and thereby strengthen coexistence in Liberia.
Outline of Transitional Justice in Liberia

I) Transitional justice was incorporated as part of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which called for:
   i) The establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to address issues of accountability, healing, and reconciliation
   ii) Security sector reform

II) The recommendations in the TRC Report
   i) Criminal prosecutions—both domestic and international
   ii) Public sanction and lustrations
   iii) Reparation and the addressing of victims’ needs
   iv) Memorialization and memorials
   v) Community reconciliation (Palava Hut process)
   vi) Land reform
   vii) Identity, changing minds and attitudes in Liberia
   viii) Administration of justice

Links Between Transitional Justice and Coexistence in Liberia

A number of factors and issues were identified as links between coexistence and transitional justice. These include but are not limited to:

I) Limitations and lack of trust in the justice system

   In the absence a capable justice system, criminal accountability for past human rights violations will be difficult to achieve. This will put an onus on the population to find alternative paths to peace and, when possible, reconciliation. Working towards a more socially inclusive society, while not discounting the injustices that have occurred, can be one such path.

II) Striving for reconciliation in a climate of mistrust

   A coexistence lens can help promote communication across interpersonal and intercommunal divides, and across divides between citizens and state institutions.

III) Identity issues, social exclusion, and land disputes

   Some of the recommendations of the TRC report center on resolving identity issues and reforming the land tenure system. A coexistence lens is responsive to individuals’ and groups’ need for identity and inclusion, and seeks to balance recognition of diversity with the need for social cohesion.
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<th>Broad Coexistence Obstacles*</th>
<th>Activities and Opportunities for Advocacy</th>
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| **Class & Ethnic Divisions**  | I) Community outreach and sensitization to coexistence principles through town hall meetings, dialogues, and radio talk shows. This should include engaging youth, women, traditional leaders, and ex-combatants.  
II) Promote policies that engender social cohesion through constitutional review and enactment of laws.  
III) Increase information sharing between the national legislature and citizens.  
IV) Establish a system for the judicial apportioning of lands.  
V) Devise a national curriculum in schools that promotes a Liberian national identity. |
| **Religious Divides**         | I) Involve religious, political, and traditional leaders in peacebuilding activities and processes.  
II) Hold national and cross-community dialogues to increase understanding and discuss issues of concern.  
III) Raise awareness of each religion’s values and way of life through various media, workshops, community forums, etc.  
IV) Build networks to carry out these activities. |
| **Breakdown of Cultural Values & Norms** | I) Create forums where Liberian values are highlighted and promoted.  
II) Integrate these values into the school system (for example: education on citizenship).  
III) Create employment opportunities for parents.  
IV) Provide reproductive-health education and services.  
V) Support dialogues between the younger and older generations and encourage mentorship between them.  
VI) Raise awareness among youth about traditional values. |
| **Land Disputes**             | I) Advocate for a review of existing laws and policies on acquiring and owning land.  
II) Raise awareness of land issues through radio, traditional leaders, NGOs, schools, churches, and mosques. |
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<th>Identity, Governance, and the State</th>
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<td>III) Advocate for, and work with, the Land Reform Commission to conduct research on baseline studies of the existing land issues in Nimba, Margibi, Maryland, and Montserrado counties.</td>
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<td>IV) Promote coexistence values within community-level work related to land issues.</td>
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