Overview:

The Washington Network on Children and Armed Conflict (WNCAC) met on 18 September 2012 with a focus on recent, groundbreaking research conducted in Liberia. The session shared insights into the findings of the research, which sought to listen to the expressed hopes, concerns, needs and wants of youth in Liberia, and the ways in which the international community might engage Liberian youth more effectively for the peaceful development of the country.

In March 2012, Search for Common Ground in collaboration with American University, the Federation of Liberian Youth, the Ministry of Youth and Sport in Liberia, and the Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo Information Services, conducted a comprehensive study on the state of youth in Liberia: the concerns, wants, needs and hopes. The study also sought to compare international donor priorities with the expressed concerns of young Liberians. Qualitative interviews were supplemented with quantitative mapping of aid flows and analysis of a multitude of engagement, development and well-being indicators. Two of the researchers, Celeste Visser and Tom Brownlee, presented on the research process, their experiences, and the findings. Special guest Mohammed Nasser, President of the Federation of Liberian Youth, presented on Liberian national policy for youth engagement and outlined his vision for the role of youth in Liberia.

Speakers:

Mohammed A. Nasser is the President of the Federation of Liberian Youth (FLY), which he was elected to in January 2012. In this leadership position, Mr. Nasser continues his outstanding record of working with the youth and student communities of Liberia for the past ten years. He had previously served as the Vice President of the FLY from 2010-2012. Mr. Nasser has ably
represented the Federation in and out of the country, and has travelled with the President of the Republic of Liberia to discuss the state of affairs of Liberian youth and students in other parts of the world. He holds an M.B.A. in Public Financial Management from the University of Liberia, a World Bank-sponsored program, and is currently an M.B.A. candidate in International Relations at the University of Liberia.

Celeste Visser and Tom Brownlee were part of the seven-member research team that conducted the "Youth to Youth" research in Liberia. Celeste holds a B.S. in Economics with a minor in Peace Studies from Manhattan College, and an M.A. in International Development/Development Economics from American University. She has held internship and research positions at the Inter-American Foundation and the International Institute for Impact Evaluation. Tom holds a B.A. in Mathematics from Boston College and an M.A. in Comparative and Regional Studies with a focus on Africa and youth issues from American University. Tom has recently interned with Grassroots Soccer in Cape Town, South Africa, and Youth Advocate Program International in Washington, D.C. In addition to Celeste and Tom, the "Youth to Youth" research team was composed of Liat Krawczyk, Kate Krumrei, Cari McCachren, Neha Raval and Amadou Bakayoko.

Youth to Youth: Measuring Youth Engagement in Liberia
In Northern Uganda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone

Celeste and Tom’s Presentation – Youth to Youth researchers

Please refer to Tom and Celeste’s PowerPoint for more details:

Overview:

This pilot was a youth-led, technically advised process that was initiated by Search for Common Ground in partnership with American University, the Ministry of Youth & Sports in Liberia, the Federation of Liberian Youth, and the Liberian Ministry for Statistics and Geo Information Services.

Research Question: Are Liberian Youth engaged in their society, and to what extent are their (perceived and existent) priorities aligned with those of international donor operating in post-peace accord Liberia?

The methodology was called a Listening and Learning Approach. It employed a mixed methods approach.

24 youth in Liberia – qualitative research “Listening and Learning”

• Recruit – sat down terms of reference. Used networks.
• Orientation – 5 days with local research partners to build team morale and ensure everyone understood the Listening and Learning process.
• Divide 4 teams into 15 counties. Teams – AU and Liberian Researchers
• 2 people going around community. 1 with tape recorder and 1 leading conversation.
• Want natural conversation. What does it mean to be a youth in Liberia? Not leading the question.

Themes (8 in total but discuss 3 today):

Education:
• There was a dedication to education from youth. Youth would go out of the way to get to school or get a family member to school.
• Primary schools, but limited high schools around.
• ODA to education
• ODA to education is increasing, government priorities of education increasing
• Disparity of funding going to primary schooling
• Source of frustration for youth who had been through primary education
• 2004-2009 literacy rates increased from 71 to 79%
• Story: Small town. Primary, high school and vocational school for girls. Went across river and found majority on other side river were not attending school as they were afraid of the water.

Livelihood
• Generally ODA funding is increasing
• 1 good sign are the statistics on locally started businesses
• Increased access to employment and vocational training – youth.
• Empower youth to establish own business and Entrepreneur opportunities.
• Knowledge of career tracks needed to do what they want.
• More protection on workers’ rights. Not enforced currently. Scared of being fired if protest peacefully. (example)

Security:
• Felt country needs more professional police
• Corruption: steps need to be taken to lessen corruption and perceived corruption
• Standards at checkpoints needed. Inconsistent. Simple steps help to increase perception
• Need increased protection of small arms and light weapons
• Need increased protection in security in prisons and conditions
• Refugees left to find land taken or government sold land (land disputes)
Recommendations:

- Youth engaging Youth and developing, using and incorporating.
- Accountability
- Recommendations on engaging youth to reduce needs of youth
- Encourage mentoring
- Build youth to youth model for education building
- Youth were very engaged and impressed in informal activities. Ways they were pursuing. Also heard barriers and what marginalized youth were experiencing.
- Donor priorities – yes money is going to areas youth are talking about. But priorities not matching, and allow youth to be able to speak on priorities

Mohammed A. Nasser – President of FLY

Please refer to PowerPoint for more details:

Fly – established 1974

- Pledge to government of young people nucleus of society and agents of change socially, economically and politically
- Goal promote youth participation in national decision making
- Responsibilities: Participation, policy, leadership,
- Rights of youth, responsibilities of youth, obligations gov. to youth, obligations of society to youth
- Loyal to peace security and development
- Be a positive role model

Marginalized youth Targeted:

- Out of school, in school, illiterate
- Unemployed and underemployed youth
- Youth with disabilities

Top 3 themes for work

1) Education & Training
2) Employment and Empowerment
3) Sexual Reproductive

Agenda for Transformation Vision 2030 – Fly- issues now to 2030
• Natural resources, Language, Oil, Corruption, National Identity, Reconciliation
• Increase employment if have skills training programs for young people.
• Workshops – content development. What can we do to make leaders accountable? Press on issues, give evidence and proof.
• Participation leads to ownership/Ownership leads to stability

Q & A

Q) Situation for rule of law in strengthening youth, few programs for youth and rule of law and addressing areas of security. Research indicators show that the government enforcement of rule of law is poor.

• Large improvements are needed and it ties into police corruption and prisons. Room for improvement and they have a role in assisting. Team with organizations. To build capacity and knowing what next step is. Huge step in more youth involvement with video and posters and letting youth know there is more opportunity. The barrier for many is not knowing.
• Create awareness of rights, because once know rights they are empowered. AWARENESS is key.

Q) Relevant ministries implementing action plans. How can ministries promote resources through action plans?

Consultation with counties where policies are not passed. Government does a lot when it comes to policy, but need to adopt and act on these policies. Not just be a story and discussion. An Act would just be a 3 page critical issues vs. policy 100 plus pages.

Q) Youth Organizations – What is the Criteria to belong?

• Open for everyone – Are there orgs that are illiterate that are marginalized.

Q) What about youth leaders separate from FLY?

• As youth leaders they feel disconnected and hopefully able to see more opportunities. Working to restructure chapters and have elections help build those opportunities and fill in gaps.

Q) Another challenge is talking to communities and organizations (dialogue going both directions). Many youth and community members are open to going to youth meetings. However there is a disconnect where others are not united. Some state stating “What Meeting?” Reaching more than just reaching educated males who speak loudest seems to be an issue.
• Utilizing SMS, radio, and other forms of communication to reach rural and marginalized areas. Areas that may have high illiteracy rates.

Comment: There are lots of critical issues and we are only highlighting a few critical issues. – Education, Employment,

Q) Youth employment and livelihood – There have been a lot of programs with livelihood and many of these plans of implementation are too short. Example: 2011 tried to a vacation employment, the government didn’t pay in time and lots of riots broke out. Are there suggestions in how employment and livelihood programs can be improved?

• A suggestion is to complete a situational analysis prior to implementation to find where youth want to work. Example: If youth don’t want to be tailors, then don’t train in this field. Also, what access to employment is available within that area? What will help better the society as a whole?
• Donors – only want to learn what they already know and they are not thinking outside box. There needs to be a conversation with youth and the private sector. There are complaints about hiring outside. However, there could be training of youth for more jobs that are right there in their communities.
• A Situation analysis would seek out the gaps happening between youth and donor agencies. Help to get true ideas of positive and long lasting solutions.

Comment: Monitoring is obvious but necessary and is not being implemented.

• There are vast gaps in actual work and results. For youth there is a gap in linking what they have learned to market and accompanying to starting in these positions.
• Vocational training programs: It is critical that literacy accompanies vocational training. No complimentary skills, which are needed, are being taught in vocational training programs.
• A suggestion is to set youth up with apprenticeships and co-ops and ensure challenges are met. This is not happening as most people are concerned with right now and not the long term effects of this process.

Q) Unemployment is 60% to 70%. What is role of civil society in this process? Are we raising expectations and failing?

• Incorporating relationships in bridging gap of private sector and youth training is needed. Filter in capturing needs. Making sure they have skills, not just entry level skills but skills to help them build upon towards a career path.
• Having a realistic discussion with youth. Not all youth are going to get perfect jobs. How can we encourage them to relate more to them and be an active part of society? Encouraging support for programs that are working. Example: Training in classroom vs. programs with hands on experience. Help government funding go in the right direction..
Comment: Engaging youth

- Radio is best way to reach youth. Give opportunity to socialize and exchange.
- Taking students from one area to another, to help them better understand what is really happening in their country. This helps them engage with others, but this is not happening. Activities to allow them to socialize between different marginalized groups such as different games allows for them to have fun, while learning and these things are not happening.
- Building community programs with radio is useful. SMS messages don’t work for all areas with lack of cell phones and towers, and also the fact that it is only sending out messages and does not allow for a dialogue.
- More contact is needed. Several Liberian researchers who went to rural areas commented on how they were experiencing Liberia for first time. They didn’t know people lived like this, didn’t know this was a problem. Every team was shocked with their encounters.

Guest involved in social work: Going where the client is – informal collectives – car wash, or informal commune – leadership present, teamwork, firming up ties, and mentor youth led organization. Gives them a sense of pride and possibility of what could be.

Exchange ideas or events:

(Commercial and missed a large part of this discussion)

Entrepreneurship training in Liberia: Guest interested in comment on where the clients are and learning more for this project.

October 10th and 12th

The PowerPoint presentation used for this meeting is available at: 
http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/childrenandyouth/pdf/WNCAC%20Presentation.pdf and 

These notes were compiled by Shanna Todd and Caroline Brazill and edited by Jonathan White, Saji Prelis and John Williamson