

## YMCA Liberia Voter Education Program

### The country

Situated in West Africa, Liberia is Africa's oldest republic. Although founded by freed American slaves, Liberia is largely made up of indigenous Africans. The country has a population of 3.3 million, according to the United Nations. The life expectancy is 41 years for men, and 42 years for women.

In 2003, 14 years of war ended after rebels and the interim government signed a peace accord. Currently, the United Nations is overseeing a plan to disarm tens of thousands of former rebels, as elections are planned for 2005.

### YMCA of Liberia

The YMCA of Liberia was founded in 1881. The current strategic areas of work are Leadership Development, Adolescent Reproductive Health Program (ARHP), Peace Building and Education, Youth Entrepreneurship Program, Youth Workers Training and Membership Development.

The YMCA is the national leader in rehabilitating former child combatants and runs primary schools, youth employment and psychosocial counseling services to aid youths traumatized by war. The YMCA currently reaches 50,000 young people with support from the YMCA and U.N. partners. In addition, the Indianapolis YMCA and YMCA World Service are supporting the strengthening of YMCA of Liberia.



*Children in reconciliation program – YMCA Liberia*

### The Voter Education Program

The YMCA Liberia is working to promote a voting culture in Liberia, particularly among youths, students, ex-combatants, returnees and the illiterate.

### Objective

***To encourage students, ex-combatants, returnees (refugees and internally displaced persons) and illiterate residents to define—and question—the qualities needed in candidates who run for public office.***

## **Background**

With the war over and the disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration process on course, there is a need to reintegrate ex-combatants into mainstream Liberian society and assist refugees and internally displaced persons in returning to their homes. This is especially important as Liberia will hold general and presidential elections in October 2005.

There is no precedent for a participative democracy in Liberia. In the nation's history there has been only one election—the Special Election of 1997 that offered a choice of candidates and internationally accepted procedures for free and fair voting. That election provided important insights into gaps that remain today.

Before Liberians can demand a government that acts solely in the public's interest, they must understand it. Yet, they have never experienced such a government firsthand. Complicating matters is the country's high illiteracy rate. The vast illiterate majority is unaware of their rights, duties and obligations as citizens of a democracy. As a result, this group cannot effectively exercise them. Before they can vote, they must understand that the nation's future depends on this election.

There is a need to adequately inform all stakeholders of the sources of democracy, the electoral process and good governance. Some of this education can be carried out through the media, but it must be delivered by forms other than the printed word.

It is with this background that the YMCA Youth Voters Education Program seeks to prepare voters, especially youths, to make sound decisions during the voting process and contribute positively to the rebuilding of post-war Liberia.

## **Key Activities**

- Engage school students in activities geared at defining the qualities necessary in a candidate for president, vice president, senator or representative. Activities might include essay contests, workshops, training programs or other exercises that challenge them to develop their own ideas.
- Engage community residents, including ex-combatants and returnees, of 10 towns in discussions on the qualities necessary in a candidate for president, vice president, senator or representative.
- Engage youth in a national forum that develops a set of questions to be posed to candidates for national office.
- Hold public meetings in accessible major towns during which candidates address and interact with the voter population directly.

## **Outputs**

- At least 2,500 secondary and university students in at least 12 districts around the country will have participated in an activity that has challenged them to develop their own ideas about the qualities necessary for public office (October 2005).
- Meetings, workshops and discussions will have taken place in at least 10 towns involving at least 2,500 citizens, with appropriate proportions of ex-combatants and returnees (October 2005).
- A report from youth forum resulting in questions for the candidates (October 2005).
- At least four towns will host meetings. Candidates will speak to voters and answer questions (October 2005).

## **Indicators:**

- Project reports and student essays
- Visible participation of youths raising questions for the candidates on radio talk shows and in candidate debates.
- Visible participation of candidates in speaking with the public and responding to questions.