

THE GLOBAL CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE (TGCI)
The Liberia Citizen-Government Engagement Project: An Update
May, 2017

Project Context

The TGCI Liberian Citizen-Government Engagement Project (CGEP) seeks to engage citizens and government in interventions to combat child sexual abuse and gender based violence in Liberia.¹ Through engaging citizens with publicity and an SMS and hotline system, the project addresses sexual abuse and rape by increasing knowledge of the issue, rates of reporting, response by government offices, and persecution of perpetrators. The current stage of the project is a scaling up to four counties from the initial pilot in 2015 that covered just two counties.



Citizen-Government Consultations

TGCI-CGE Poster

Please Don't Hide It
 Report All Cases of Sexual Abuse

Bomi County: 0775.607.493, Grand Cape Mount County: 0777948.725, Margibi County: 0776.628.745, Monsterrado: 0775.893.612

As opposed to many projects that only conduct baseline, midterm and summative evaluations, CGEP uses feedback loops to regularly gather data and engage citizens, government officials and project staff through collaborative reviews of the project activities and outcomes. Ongoing conversations provide an opportunity to analyze and understand the current system, to continually improve performance and messaging, and to guide future activities. The consultative process, drawing on findings from field research, allows for a dynamic evolution of the project as it is implemented. This blog shares the results of one such feedback loop, a second data gathering point that occurred in early 2017.

¹ The Global Citizens Initiative (TGCI) is an international NGO that brings together people and organizations to address global issues within and across countries. TGCI, with funding support from Making All Voices Count (MAVC) is coordinating the implementation of the Liberian Citizen-Government Engagement Project. For more about the Project see www.endingsexualabuse.org. For more about TGCI see www.theglobalcitizensinitiative.org

Data Collection

During January and February, 14 focus groups and 26 key informant interviews were conducted across the counties of Cape Mount, Bomi, Margibi, and Montserrado. These groups provide a diverse representation of stakeholders across citizens-including youth, teachers, police officers, social workers, government officials, and judiciary members regarding their perceptions of and experiences with the SMS and hotline system. Interview questions focused on responses to sexual abuse through use of the SMS and hotline systems, reporting challenges and initiatives occurring within schools and communities. Discussions were recorded by researchers in the field and analyzed for common themes and patterns.

Findings

Results are presented here regarding the four primary objectives of the key informant interviews and focus group initiatives: (a) citizen awareness and knowledge of project SMS/hotline systems; (b) citizen awareness/knowledge of TGCI specific sexual abuse awareness raising and behavior change message; (c) incidence of reported and registered sexual abuse through the SMS and/or telephone hotline; and (d) response and referral rates of the Ministry of Gender to SMS/telephone hotline reports of incidence of child sexual abuse.

Citizen awareness and knowledge of project SMS/hotline systems:

- The main reasons cited to utilize the project hotline were the confidentiality of those reporting and the increased response rate to sexual assault. Individuals with direct experience using the system found it to be effective and free of the financial and transportation concerns associated with other forms of reporting. One child welfare officer shared this as “*communities that we visited few months ago have told us that the system is welcoming and should be sustained.*” Key reasons to use the hotline included to increase the likelihood of reporting, to reduce the potential for perpetrators to escape, to deter future crimes, and to lessen the likelihood that cases could be compromised.
- The idea of using an SMS or hotline system was familiar to many individuals because of their background using a similar hotline during the Ebola outbreak.
- The existence of multiple hotlines in some communities, such as those attributed to the Liberian National Police or hospitals, was initially confusing to a few who had access to those hotlines. One participant expressed this confusion by noting “the police have their own hotlines; TGCI recently has introduced another.”

Citizen awareness/knowledge of TGCI specific sexual abuse awareness raising and behavior change messages:

- Schools were a key place where awareness raising and behavior change messages were conveyed to students. In school, students learn information that they can share with their families and friends. Organizations were also formed within schools that served as watchdogs against crimes, such as buddy clubs that discussed rape, child marriages, and prevention strategies.



- However, schools could also be predatory. One child and women protection officer cited that schools had to explicitly implement no sex for grade and no grade for

sex policies. Children were given information about where to report cases if teachers or administrators required sex from them. One focus group described, *“we have also conducted awareness among students, teachers and school principal. Telling them that rape is not good and [if a] teacher is involved, it is a crime that can’t be compromised.”*

- Other key interventions took the form of community meetings, radio jingles, fliers, and posters. The main messages of these interventions included concrete information about the SMS/hotline system, ways to prevent sexual abuse, and consequence for perpetrators.

Incidence of reported and registered sexual abuse through SMS and/or telephone hotline:

- The utility of the hotline was impaired by illiteracy for many communities. One focus group noted that as *“most of us don’t know how to read and write therefore, sending SMS would be very challenging for us to do it secret without the involvement of someone.”* A community leader reinforced this sentiment, noting that *“Liberians don’t like to read and write, therefore anything that involves writing and reading makes people shy away and think that only those who are educated can be part of such thing.”*
- Many participants also voiced concern that coverage was limited. Combined with uneven access to and potential technological challenges with phones, the SMS/telephone system was not always available at times when victims most needed it. This suggests that an important area for future research is to examine how distance and rurality impact the reporting process.
- Reporting could be hazardous for individuals, a concern amplified by mixed perceptions regarding the system’s confidentiality. One participant described the process as *“very risky and it involves lot of time and energy, and even sometimes your life is at risk from the perpetrator’s family members or the perpetrator himself.”* There were also many instances in which the perpetrator was related to the victim, such as a father or brother, or related to the potential reporter of the crime. Several participants expressed a desire for some support, such as a safe location or money, for those who came forward.



Response and referral rates of Ministry of Gender to SMS/telephone hotline reports of incidence of child sexual abuse:

- Beyond creating issues with phone coverage, rurality also limited police ability to access and respond to cases. Police often did not have vehicles to get to crime scenes, a concern amplified by poor road conditions that led to delayed response times. In some of these cases, evidence was destroyed and perpetrators escaped. Lack of transportation was pervasive to all aspects of the response



process and prevented victims from getting prompt medical care, officials from reaching crime scenes, and all parties from accessing court facilities during the trial phase.

- There was a sense that at any point these cases could be “compromised.” The word compromised was used specifically by participants to refer to cases where deals were made or complaints were dropped rather than reaching adjudication. The pressure to not pursue cases was widespread. One focus group shared that “community people’s view of rape is different, therefore they do everything possible traditionally to compromise the case. They don’t see it has a crime but an opportunity to marry girls under age.” One participant noted that this discrepancy between income that allowed richer families to pray on poorer groups, noting “those who [have] money are the main people influencing their children into drug abuse, rape and harassment.” Community officials could be complacent in the compromising of cases by demanding bribes, refusing to act, or destroying evidence.

Next Steps

A third feedback loop cycle is planned to begin in May 2017. This will involve a selection of five villages in each of the four countries in which there will be i) focus groups of youth, separated into boys and girls groups, ii) citizen-government groups and iii) for each county, key informant interviews. This field work will then inform the citizen, government officials and project staff consultations in each county, seeking to use that information to improve strategies, messages, access to the hotline and SMS system, and the presentation of results from the government (Ministries of Gender, Justice and Health) database systems.

