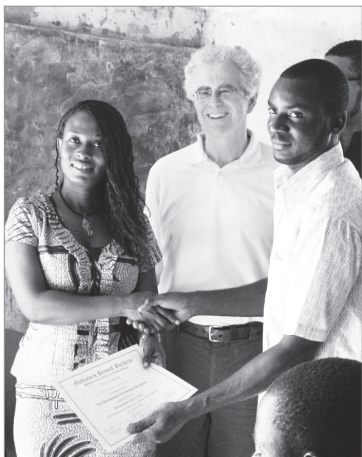


WHEN CHILD SOLDIERS RETURN HOME

Using PCP dialogue in Liberia

Could you eschew violence if you were coerced into becoming a rebel soldier and were taught to commit atrocities at the age of eight?



If you were a citizen who had witnessed brutal executions during the civil war, could you welcome these former soldiers into your community?

These questions are at the heart of the first major project of Mediators Beyond Borders (MBB), a nonprofit formed in 2006 to help communities build their capacity for preventing, resolving, and healing from conflict.

The First and Second Liberian Civil Wars were murderous conflicts, fought from 1980 through 2005, leaving Liberia socially, politically, and economically devastated. This year, after more than a year of preparation, MBB is implementing a multifaceted plan to help one hundred former child soldiers (now 18- to 40-year-old men with families of their own) living in a Ghanaian refugee camp rejoin four Liberian communities.

The organization chose to focus on reconciling former child soldiers with their communities because, says Ginny Morrison, MBB Project Leader and Public Conversations Project training alum, “many experts believe the stability of [former soldiers] is a key to peace in a region or nation. The likelihood of these men returning to violence poses a serious risk to regions previously at war.”

Public Conversations Project Program Director Dave Joseph joins Morrison as a member of the fifteen-person all-volunteer team traveling to Africa during the five- to ten-year project. The long-term nature of MBB’s work reflects its commitment to establishing systems that serve communities, instead of one-time interventions.

A conflict resolution practitioner with her own business, Morrison embraces MBB’s principles, which are similar to PCP’s: “We work alongside people who live there; it’s not about importing our values and practices. It’s about supplementing theirs.”

In accordance with that philosophy, MBB works with local partners to provide former soldiers with vocational training, psychological support, and mentoring. Yet, what makes MBB’s work unique from other integration programs is their focus on preparing the community.

“We work for months ahead of time to surface the community’s concerns, to work through their worries and their legitimate, angry reactions and to prepare them. They have to think about how they would like to rebuild

the community and include the former soldiers and their families,” explains Morrison, who draws on her PCP training by using an adapted dialogue format during the preparation and post-integration events.

The real objective, Morrison says, is enhancing the possibility that former child soldiers and community members can coexist: “Since the war, people have had to rebuild their entire society, and part of that is building a sense of connectedness to strangers, learning how to live alongside people with very different views.”

But the obstacles are many: Communities feel threatened by people who have committed terrific acts of violence. Often, they marginalize the former soldiers, who are likely to express anger or generate a livelihood in the only way they know—using violence. Also, community members sometimes feel competitive and resentful about the support and resources child soldiers receive since they too have suffered tremendous loss, been the victims of horrific warfare, and are living in desperate economic situations.

A significant impact on former child soldiers’ rehabilitation, says Morrison, is that they typically served during their pre-adolescent years, a critical time for forming identity. The boys MBB is working with spent on average five years in brutal combat, in forces who deliberately worked to form a different kind of identity centered on a “war family.”

“Many people think putting these men back in a community—a positive environment without the stressors of war—is enough. But you have to undo previous influences and teach them to think in line with what it means to be living in a community,” says Morrison.

Therefore, local partner the University of Ghana-Legon is providing Ntu, an Afrocentric psychotherapy. A local partner, National ExCombatants Peacebuilding Initiative, comprised of former child soldiers who have already rejoined communities, will provide mentoring. Other local partners and MBB prepare the men to generate income and contribute to the community. In tandem, these organizations will support returnees and the community, helping work through conflicts as they arise and coaching the former soldiers to respond to complex challenges in a nonviolent way.

MBB sees this as just the first step in a reconciliation process for the country, explains Morrison: “A whole generation has experienced living in survival mode. Some people describe this as an entire country in need of trauma healing. MBB’s next step is looking at how we can help foster a long-term reconciliation process. We see dialogues and high-level dialogue skills as being integral to that.” ■

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GINNY MORRISON,
PROJECT LEADER,
MEDIATORS BEYOND
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