

While Aid Trickles In, Liberians Get Creative To Make Ends Meet

By Tristan McConnell
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MONROVIA, Liberia -- The walls are missing and the ceiling is snaked with cracks. When it rains, puddles form on the uneven concrete floor over which a twisted jumble of extension cords and power strips weave toward a small diesel generator chugging away in the corner. It's a typical workplace in Monrovia, the overcrowded capital of this war-ravaged West African nation, and it's home to the grandly titled Association of Liberian Professional Secretaries and Clerks, where rows of customers learn to type on old computers. "We are doing this work to help ourselves," explains Knowles Shain, the group's chairman. "The government should make employment for its citizens but if those facilities don't exist we'll do it for ourselves."

Last month, Liberia's president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf met with donors in Washington to secure \$691 million in debt relief from the US, Britain, and Germany, and \$355 million in aid pledges to boost the country's moribund postwar economy. This will also help alleviate a \$3.7 billion debt burden run up by Ms. Johnson Sirleaf's corrupt warlord predecessors during 14 years of devastating civil war. Yet, despite the good news, government officials and aid workers in Monrovia are skeptical. "Forgiving debt does not fill stomachs," says Mengesha Rebede, head of the United Nations refugee agency in Liberia. He and others explain that many of the aid pledges made years ago have yet to materialize.

Most Liberians – two-thirds of whom live on less than \$1 a day – can't wait for aid and foreign investment to generate employment. So, like Mr. Shain, they are working with what little they've got to create their own jobs through clever, small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Joseph Larmre pays \$2 a month for a four-by-five-foot alcove alongside a dilapidated local administrative building in downtown Monrovia. He has worked there as a barber for the last year earning up to \$4 a day shaving heads and trimming mustaches. "I need to do this barbering to pay for school fees for me and for my son. Without this money we cannot live," explains Mr. Larmre, who is studying economics at the university while his son attends primary school.

In Monrovia, almost every imaginable space has been occupied by squatters seeking a place to live or to run their business. Young hawkers weave between cars carrying their trays of sweets, pens, and handkerchiefs. The city was built for half a million people but today it is home to 1.3 million – more than a third of the population – and it is buzzing with activity. Unemployment stands at more than 80 percent, although this figure doesn't include self-employed Liberians who make ends meet through unregulated, untaxed work. The last government survey, conducted five years ago, showed that a full 78 percent of the country's workers operate in the informal sector.

"The informal sector contributes tremendously to the economy," says United Nations Development Programme spokesperson Anthony Selmah. Indeed, most Liberians who are fortunate enough to have any income at all are not working in an office or earning a monthly wage, they are entrepreneurs, hawkers, hairdressers, and bakers. These "average joe" Liberians were given a boost by Black Entertainment Television's founder Robert Johnson who recently announced a \$30 million fund to support Liberian entrepreneurs. But most would rather have proper jobs, and the government is working on it.

The Ministry of Labor has a tough target to hit, according to the Liberian Emergency Employment Program, which calls for 50,000 jobs over the next 18 months. Employment projects are in the pipeline but most tend to be short-term public works carried out on a small-scale using intensive labor, such as fixing roads or clearing garbage. This will not be enough to solve the unemployment crisis, which is why Johnson-Sirleaf

spent one day during last month's visit to the US marketing Liberia to private investors. US-based tire manufacturer Firestone employs 4,000 Liberians on its rubber plantation here, while the anticipated \$1 billion investment by steel company Arcelor Mittal to extract iron ore is expected to create 3,000 jobs. Johnson-Sirleaf must attract more of these large international investors. The lifting of sanctions on timber exports in 2006 and the anticipated lifting of sanctions on Liberian diamonds later this year will help.

But the fact remains that Liberia's predominantly agricultural economy is very small and very weak: In 2006, GDP was only \$664 million, or less than \$200 per person. "We've got some support but it is not manifest," says deputy minister of labor Ms. Sedia Bangoura. "There is a lot of pledging but it is extremely slow to transform into concrete projects." Filling that gap are the likes of Shain who can earn up to \$15 a day charging customers for the use of his computer and teaching them to type.

As Liberians hope that their government and the international community will not fail them, creative entrepreneurialism is still working to sustain people, for now. But without fundamental improvements, observers say Liberians' patience will wane. They want jobs, not just streetlights in some parts of town or drinking water in a few neighborhoods. Ernest Gaie, a country representative for the non-governmental organization Action Aid, sums up: "People are getting disillusioned day by day with the lack of change, but 14 years of destruction cannot be rebuilt in 14 months of new government."



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