

# Contributing to a peaceful future in Liberia

Ten years of Community Based Sociotherapy

A BEST PRACTICE PAPER



“CBS gave us a platform to break the barriers of silence and to express ourselves, so that we don’t continue to live with hate after the war”



Sustaining Peace through  
Development Initiatives (SPDI)





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### This publication is based on the experiences of five organisations:

**ZOA** is an international relief and recovery organisation, currently working in 14 (post) conflict countries - including Liberia. After nearly 20 years, ZOA phased out of Liberia at end of 2022. The Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS) approach has been piloted by ZOA in Liberia since 2013.

**The Peace Hub Liberia (PHL)** is an organisation set up in 2021 by CBS trainers to provide quality training and support in Liberia. Trainers of the PHL have been involved from the start of CBS in Liberia as facilitators and trainers.

**The International Institute for Community Based Sociotherapy (IICBS)** aims to build a network and knowledge institute for professionals, trainers and organisations implementing or interested to implement CBS based on defined quality standards in their communities. IICBS specialists have been providing expertise since the start of CBS in Liberia.

**The Young Men Christian Association in Liberia (YMCA Liberia)** was founded in 1881 and has since been working on uniting and empowering particularly young people in Liberia. The CBS approach has been supported and implemented by YMCA Liberia.

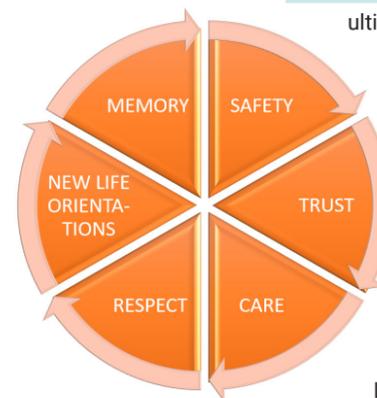
**Sustaining Peace through Development Initiatives (SPDI)** is a Liberian NGO that was created in 2021 by national ZOA staff. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of communities in building an inclusive society for sustainable peace and development. SPDI staff have gained a wealth of CBS experience through their involvement in the ZOA led CBS projects.

## 1. Introduction

War and local violence often disrupt the social fabric and trust between people. Communal bonds are broken, and people may have gone through traumatic experiences. This impacts their mental health and how they relate to others. Restoring trust in each other and in a peaceful future is a prerequisite for rebuilding flourishing and stable communities.

**“During the war so many things happened. Family members were killed in front of you and the killers were never punished. We lost trust in each other”**  
(male CBS trainer)

To restore trust and contribute to a more peaceful future, ZOA has introduced **Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS)** in Liberia in 2013. Key to this approach - and central in ZOA’s way of working – is the fact that CBS is community led and driven. Representing the diversity within a community, CBS brings people from different backgrounds together to discuss and reflect on (shared) values, attitudes and behaviour experienced in daily life. The approach is implemented in small groups of 12 – 15 men and women from different age groups, guided by two well-trained facilitators from the community. The groups meet during a period of 15 weeks on a weekly basis and the participants voluntarily accept to participate without remuneration. The facilitators are trained and supervised by experienced CBS trainers<sup>1</sup>. The aim of this approach is that the participants learn and experience new constructive behaviour and new ways of dealing with past negative experiences. This ultimately has a positive influence on their personal life as well as on their environment. The learning process takes time and CBS uses a six-phase model (see figure 1) to guide the conversations in the small groups. The CBS approach is guided by seven principles (see box 1), which makes it unique. The CBS groups are a safe environment where participants feel confident to share and practice new behaviour before applying it in their daily life.



In the past 10 years, 30.000 women and men have participated in CBS sessions in Liberia, 350 people are trained as facilitators and 16 as trainers<sup>2</sup>. These trainers are now organised in the Peace Hub Liberia. While ZOA phased out from Liberia at the end of 2022, CBS expertise remains available in the country with the Peace Hub Liberia. This paper documents the CBS journey in Liberia, collecting stories from participants from different walks of life<sup>3</sup>. Best practices are also written down to be used in Liberia and in other conflict affected countries where CBS can contribute to psychosocial wellbeing and strengthened social cohesion, by (re-) establishing meaningful social relationships in communities.

**Figure 1: Phases of sociotherapy**

**Principles of CBS**

- Interest
- Equality
- Democracy
- Here and Now
- Responsibility
- Participation
- Learning by Doing

**Box 1: Principles of CBS**

<sup>1</sup>Dekker, C. (2018) *Handbook Training in Community Based Sociotherapy. Experiences in Rwanda, East Congo and Liberia.*

<sup>2</sup>With the support of the Embassy of Sweden (2017 – 2022), European Union (2020-2022), Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013-2015) and USAID (2019 – 2022), and private funding.

<sup>3</sup>Collected during 2 project evaluations in 2019 and 2022.

## 2. The CBS journey in Liberia

The CBS methodology was first introduced in Liberia in 2013, as part of a programme focusing on education, agricultural development and peacebuilding. While working with farmer groups, one of the reoccurring challenges was the lack of trust which hampered the cooperation between participants. Based on personal experiences of staff members with the CBS methodology, the team decided to develop a pilot project of CBS in Liberia.

Two CBS experts (who, later on in 2019, established IICBS) started the first training of 22 facilitators in 2013 in Kakata. It was an intensive training of 15 days, in which a participatory methodology was used. During the training, the facilitators went through the six phases themselves and learned to apply the principles of CBS. They experienced what participants would also experience. After the first training, the facilitators went back to the community to start the first cycle of CBS sessions, followed by more training. After three years of facilitating and training, a selection of the facilitators was trained as trainers (currently organised in the Peace Hub Liberia). The first results and testimonies of participants were encouraging. And while learning by doing, the CBS project expanded to other counties. Later on, in 2021-2022, CBS was also piloted successfully with two specific target groups: students in schools, and local leaders and government authorities.

What made CBS a success in Liberia? Why are the trainers so motivated for CBS? It is because they saw the need for CBS in their communities which were heavily impacted by the civil war and the violence of the past.

**“Emotions always run high in our society. We face corruption, bad leadership and people get angry when they don’t get what they want. CBS is about dialogue and how to reach out in a constructive way to authorities. CBS has led to a drop in violence”** (male trainer)

They acknowledge that being a CBS facilitator or trainer was also a life changing experience for themselves.

**“It opened my eyes. I was always quickly angered, but I discovered that anger was not doing good to anybody. I learnt to manage my emotions and I’m more free now to interact with others”** (trainer)

To the trainers of the Peace Hub Liberia, CBS is very different from many other (top-down) trainings that focus on the transfer of knowledge. It is a proven method that they now actively promote as it has borne fruit in their own lives. They have trained staff from the Liberian Ministry of Gender, Children & Social Protection and the Ministry of Health (united in the MHPSS pillar in Liberia), so that social and health workers from the government can integrate CBS in their work. They see opportunities for CBS reaching other target groups.

**“In 2014 it was our dream to take CBS beyond Margibi county, and now we see CBS in 10 counties. We have CBS in schools and leaders use CBS to settle issues. But CBS is also needed in prisons and in churches!”** (male trainer)

*CBS trainers of the Peace Hub Liberia*



## 3. CBS and good governance

Community Based Sociotherapy aims at improving social relationships in conflict affected societies and people’s psychosocial wellbeing. One of the additional effects reported by CBS participants is that they feel more confident to talk to their community leaders and government authorities. Some participants in Liberia have been elected to leadership positions because of their gained self-confidence and more active role in the community.

Town chiefs and government officials also had the opportunity to participate in the CBS groups with 15 weekly sessions. However, often this didn’t happen because of their work and travel schedule. So the team decided to organize specific CBS sessions for leaders, both from community/traditional background as well as government staff. These sessions in the counties brought together mayors, police officers, paramount chiefs, town chiefs and block leaders, staff from the Ministry of Gender and the Ministry of Internal Affairs etc. In total, 161 men and 62 women participated. The duration was two series of four days with a refresher four-day session after four months. The CBS methodology was adapted to incorporate the good governance principles (see box 2) while also maintaining the core phases of CBS: safety, trust, care, respect, new life orientation, and memory.

The CBS for leaders has proven to be effective in Liberia as the participants changed their professional way of working. Their decision-making has become more participatory: they are taking the views and opinions of community members or colleagues into account. The management of information and budget is now more transparent. Accountability has improved; not only to superiors but even more so to their constituency. Men and women have actively promoted female leadership. Women have obtained higher government positions and women have been elected as community leaders.

Community members see changes in the way of working of their leaders. Leaders themselves also give examples of how the CBS for leaders influenced their professional attitude and practice.

**“Before it was difficult to meet with the mayor, but now he is organizing meetings with the ward leaders every month. And he is giving you audience when you need to see him”** (male community member)

**“I received complaints about how I managed the money. Now I set up a committee to deal with the money, to increase accountability”** (male leader)



**“I used force to take decisions, but people resisted. Now I see that it is better to take decisions together”** (male leader)

What made this CBS for leaders special? The methodology was quite different from more common good governance training, as CBS focused on self-reflection, self-discovery of attitudes and behaviour, and sharing with other leaders from different backgrounds in a safe and confidential environment. The high-quality facilitation skills of the CBS trainers were also a key factor. Reaching higher level government officials remained a challenge, especially as good governance needs buy-in from top leaders. Additional interventions will be needed, but CBS for leaders provided a good starting point to motivate and capacitate leaders for more constructive and participatory leadership.

### Good governance principles

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Participation
- Equality and inclusiveness
- Consensus oriented decision making
- Responsiveness
- Effectiveness and efficiency
- Rule of law

*Box 2: Good governance principles*

## 4. CBS in schools

The CBS methodology has been developed for adults. In Liberia however, adapted CBS sessions have also been organized in elementary and secondary schools with students between 10 and 24 years. Before the start of the CBS in schools, Peace Clubs were set up in many schools. Its members are actively involved in mediating conflicts between students and promoting peace in general. The Peace Club members were invited to the CBS sessions to help them in their role as conflict mediators, but also in their personal character development. The CBS sessions took place after school hours, in groups of no more than 15 students for 15 weeks, guided by the mentor of the Peace Club (a school teacher) and a CBS facilitator.

The students appreciated the participatory methodology of **CBS in schools**, where all participants could share their ideas and life experiences. The students were sitting in a circle. Rather than teaching or writing definitions on the blackboard, the teacher was asking questions: What does safety mean to you? How do you know you can trust someone? Can people trust you? How do you take care of yourself? What happens if you don't control your emotions, what is the impact on others? The children, as young as 10 – 12 years of age, were able to reflect on their feelings and actions, which led to changes in their individual lives.

**“I did not control my heart. But if a friend is misbehaving towards me, I should talk and share with him how I feel. And not pay him back”** (male student, 10-year-old)

The Peace Club members shared how CBS in schools helped them understand better why fellow students were violent or troublemakers. CBS also gave them **more tools and skills to mediate conflicts** using for example the concepts of trust, care and emotions. CBS participants were feeling more confident in taking leadership and in talking in public, sharing peace messages at school.

Students who did not attend the CBS sessions and who are not part of the Peace Club observed the changes in the behaviour of the CBS participants.

**“My classmate who attended CBS was very rude but now he is calm in class”** (female student)

For the mentors, the methodology of **CBS in schools** was new. Some mentors reported how CBS in schools helped them **to control their anger, both at home and in the classroom**. They learned a new style of teaching with more participation, group work and focus on the individual children, which they can apply to some extent in the classroom.

**“I was very harsh on the students and on my children, but now I speak more softly to my family and in class”** (male teacher)

**CBS in schools** has proven to be an effective methodology for students aged 10 and above, especially in combination with the Peace Clubs. These give the students a platform to use their acquired skills and share their insights. An important precondition is the quality of the facilitation by the teachers or other facilitators.



## 5. CBS and economic activities

Initially CBS was introduced in Liberia to contribute to trust building in a context where the social fabric was damaged. Evaluations show that indeed CBS has a positive influence on individual well-being, family and community relations. Interestingly, these effects also help CBS participants to improve their economic activities. Many people are engaged in petty trade, selling fish, mobile phone cards, cooking oil and all kinds of business. Trade involves maintaining good relations with customers, being trustworthy and respecting deadlines. In the CBS groups, participants discussed and experienced the topics of trust and respect. This helped them to see the importance of being a trusted vendor and a respectful service provider. This is needed to gain trust and respect.

Another important element in business is the ability to save money and to do business calculations. Women and men in the CBS groups helped each other to make more profit and upscale their commercial activities.

**“I was selling fish but often I was buying too much which I could not sell. Now I plan what and when to buy”** (female participant)

**“I didn't know how to make money and was just eating the profit, but now I run a good business together with my wife”** (male participant)

Discussions on the concept of care (how to take care of my family?) and the principle of responsibility (how can I take responsibility for my life and for my family?) initiated self-reflection, leading to these improvements. The CBS group also provided a platform to encourage each other and share business ideas and solutions to challenges.

Many CBS groups continued after the 15 weekly sessions ended. In one of the projects in Liberia, the CBS participants received 50 USD

per group, which was used for economic activities. Some groups chose to invest the money in a joint business, like cultivating cassava or selling dried fish. In other groups, the received grant was used to provide loans to the members for their individual income generating activities. The CBS sessions helped the participants to manage the group business, as the members had learned to make joint decisions (e.g., on the selection of the group business) and to control their emotions when conflicts and disagreements would arise. The CBS discussions also benefited the management of the loans.

**“We have learned to respect each other in the group and to respect also the reimbursement of the loans as the money needs to go to another group member”** (female participant)

The findings above show that CBS contributes to economic development. **Self-confidence, hope for the future, taking responsibility and improved collaboration skills** are all crucial for setting up and managing a profitable business.



## 6. CBS and gender

Two important principles of CBS are equality and participation. This is made visible by the composition and sitting arrangement in a CBS group: all participants sit in a circle, including the facilitators. Men, women, youth, older people and leaders are all invited to share their ideas and to propose the rules, which will be democratically agreed upon, to guide the CBS groups. At the start this requires great efforts of the facilitators, as often women are not used to actively take part in meetings and decision making. And (male) leaders may tend to dominate the group. However, over the course of the 15 weeks of CBS, men and women listen to each other's life experiences and challenges when discussing topics like safety, care and respect. Women gain self-confidence and all participants reflect on the roles and responsibilities of both men and women in the family and in the community. In Liberia, this happened in the regular CBS sessions with community groups but also in the specific CBS for leaders (see 3).

CBS participants in Liberia testified how CBS changed their families, leading to less domestic violence and more joint decision making by husbands and wives.

**"My husband now takes more care of the children and helps me with household work"** (female participant)

**"Women are not slaves, I am helping my wife even with cooking and fetching water"** (male participant)

During the CBS sessions, participants discussed different family types (closed, open and pyramidal families<sup>4</sup>) and how decisions are made in these different family types. This family typology helps them to engage with their families on how to have more participatory decision making. More respectful communication between spouses has also been reported.

**"Before, my father was making all the decisions in the family, but I talked to my father, and he accepted to involve us as well"** (young female participant)

Furthermore, CBS also helped women to gain more influence at community level and at the workplace. Male leaders changed their personal feelings and convictions about the position of women and men. And they translated this change into the appointment of women in leadership positions, and in listening to women during community or staff meetings. It is interesting to see that these male leaders changed their behaviour in their families as well.

**"The man is traditionally the rooster in the house. But now I bring my pay check to my wife"** (male leader)

Gender is not a specific topic during CBS sessions. But the mixed composition of the groups, the topics, and the CBS principles all contributed to more equal gender relations in families, communities and government offices in Liberia.



<sup>4</sup>Dekker, C. (2018) *Handbook Training in Community Based Socioterapy, Experiences in Rwanda, East Congo and Liberia.*

## 7. CBS and conflict resolution

CBS is introduced in post conflict contexts where the population had to deal with violence in the past. This conflict legacy leads to mistrust, damaged social relations and individual challenges of processing the past. Adults and children in these contexts tend to see violence as the way to solve conflicts, as this is their experience from the past. They often lack the skills to deal with disagreements in a more peaceful and constructive way. Thus, small issues quickly escalate into threats and fighting.

When the CBS participants in Liberia discussed the topics of safety, respect, trust, care and emotions in the safe group environment, many examples were shared of existing conflicts within the family or the community. The participants reflected on the way they currently managed conflicts and discovered the negative effects.

**"I used to fight a lot. I was involved in the confusion business; I was not controlling my emotions"** (male participant)

In the CBS groups, they also learned new ways of solving conflicts in different areas of life: in the family, in the school, the community and the workplace. At family level, parents became less harsh on the children; spouses started to dialogue more, and CBS participants restored relationships with their siblings. Even children who participated in CBS in schools became peace brokers in their own families.

The Peace Clubs and the CBS in schools helped both students and teachers to revisit their common way of dealing with troublesome students. CBS participants intervened when they saw fellow students fighting or bullying. They took them apart and talked to them, trying to understand the situation and helping them to behave in a different way.

**"We first talk, and we don't immediately say who is right and who is wrong"** (female Peace Club member)

Where needed, they refer to the teachers or the school administration. School teachers and principals also learned new ways of disciplining students.

**"In case of fighting in the school the student would be expelled. But now the mentor and the Peace Club member talk to the student and try to understand why he is so aggressive"** (school principal)

The CBS sessions for leaders improved their skills in conflict mediation as well. Community leaders play an important role in settling cases and restoring security in their areas. During the CBS sessions they realised that police interventions in case of conflicts between citizens or simply ignoring dissatisfactions among their constituency wouldn't bring sustainable peace.

**"Before I would just take them to the police station. But now I try to mediate and if they don't accept, I will still send them to police. The police will not come in anymore when I don't ask. When they see that I'm around they know that I can handle the case"** (male leader)

Non-violent and constructive conflict resolution is crucial for a society to live in peace, especially in a post conflict context where relatively minor conflicts can quickly escalate into widespread violence. The positive contribution of CBS to better ways of dealing with conflicts is therefore a very relevant effect.



## 8. How to measure the effects of CBS?

Liberian CBS participants share many examples of how CBS has positively influenced various aspects of their lives. While these stories provide valuable qualitative evidence on the impact of CBS, a quantitative study could provide important additional evidence. However, how do you measure concepts, such as reconciliation, social cohesion and equality, which have multiple meanings across socio-economic contexts, within different populations and at various levels?

To measure the impact of CBS, participants were asked to provide their own definitions of several broad outcome areas and locally led or 'bottom-up indicators' to replace top-down indicators<sup>5</sup>. As an illustration, an example of a 'bottom-up indicator' in the area of 'relationship with partner' is "equal involvement in taking decisions on how to spend household income", "speaking to each other in a polite way after an argument" and "no beating when you and your partner have an argument". These indicators were rephrased into questions with a maximum of 10 items per outcome area. The contextualized questionnaire was conducted after the first CBS session and 18 weeks later to measure any changes in perceptions and attitudes. In total, 287 participants<sup>6</sup> (70 % women and 30 % men) answered the questionnaires; see the table below for a summary of the results.

This contextualized questionnaire enabled the measurement of project participants' attitudes before and after the CBS process, providing an indication of the impact of the CBS method. The development of this tool was part of ZOA's phase-out of Liberia (December 2022) and provided an opportunity for partner organizations to continue measuring the impact of CBS with a validated instrument.



Outcome areas	Score pre-intervention	Score post-intervention	Max. score	Impact
Reconciliation	35.5	41.1	50	Significant positive change
Social cohesion <sup>7</sup>	25.9	21.9	50	Significant positive change
Relationship with partner	18.3	24.3	30	Significant positive change
Relationship with children	20.7	22.1	30	Significant positive change
Equality	35.4	38.9	50	Significant positive change
Participation	35.3	37.5	50	Significant positive change
Socioeconomic wellbeing	39.8	44.3	50	Significant positive change
Trust	35.8	40.8	50	Significant positive change

**Table 1: Pre- and post-intervention results CBS**

<sup>5</sup>In DR Congo a mixed method research on CBS including a similar bottom up indicator approach was conducted in 2020, see Research paper: *The effect of Community Based Socioterapy in Kalehe, DR Congo* | ZOA ([www.zoa-international.com/cbs](http://www.zoa-international.com/cbs)).

<sup>6</sup>Participants of CBS groups as part of the Peacebuilding and Reconciliation through Community Dialogues II (PRCD II) project funded by the Embassy of Sweden; for detailed report see IICBS (2022) *Results Report, Quantitative pre- and post-intervention study for community-based socioterapy in Liberia*

<sup>7</sup>For social cohesion, a lower score means a positive result.

## 9. Best practices for practitioners and donors

Our experience with ten years of CBS in Liberia has given us a wealth of best practices. They are relevant to all who want to contribute to psychosocial wellbeing and social cohesion in Liberia, and beyond, in other conflict affected countries.

1. **CBS is an effective approach to use in post conflict contexts** with positive effects on different levels like individual well-being, family relationships, social cohesion and socio-economic well-being. However, the effectiveness depends on the quality of the implementation of the approach. Well trained facilitators, regular debriefings and refresher trainings with the facilitators, as well as close monitoring are crucial. Without these, CBS will not achieve the expected results. As quality comes with a cost, at least two-year projects are needed to make CBS investments cost efficient.

2. **Local ownership and sustainability of the CBS approach is key.** Preferably, cooperation should be sought from the start with local partners who are interested in the CBS approach. Through their involvement in the adaptation of CBS to the context, the training of the facilitators, and the training of the best performing facilitators as trainers, they can develop into a CBS expert organisation. If no local partner is available, an alternative is to help the trainers to set up their own network of trainers and become the CBS expert available to provide technical support in their country.

3. **CBS for leaders is effective as it leads to positive changes in the attitude and behaviour of community leaders and government officials**, including improvements in good governance. However, CBS is not the panacea for all challenges around good governance. Cooperation with other actors is needed, for example with other NGOs working on good governance programmes, with bilateral donors who can lobby for more governance at national level, and with Civil Society Organisations who request accountability and transparency from the government.

4. **CBS for Peace Club members in schools is effective as it helps students to change their behaviour** and play a more active role in conflict mediation. CBS is a welcome addition to Peace Club training, which often tends to be too theoretical and not adjusted to the context.

5. **CBS contributes to economic development as participants gain self-confidence, take responsibility and improve their collaboration skills.** CBS sessions can therefore be a very useful intervention in livelihoods projects.

6. **CBS as a form of community based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) helps to prevent and decrease mental health issues.** The CBS groups provide a safe space where participants share their traumatic experiences and find

peer support in the group. However, facilitators and the implementing organisations need to be aware of the limitations of CBS and have a referral system in place. This way, participants with serious mental health issues can be referred to specialised care.

7. **The CBS approach is easy to adapt to different settings with different target groups**, such as community members, students and teachers, local leaders and government authorities, but also refugees or prisoners. At the same time, the CBS take-aways and applications in daily life differ for each participant. CBS interventions in other countries beyond Liberia like DR Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Rwanda and Uganda, although in different phases of maturity, show evidence of positive changes at personal, family and community level as well.



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