

A photograph of a rural village scene. A dirt road winds through the center, flanked by lush green vegetation and trees. In the foreground, a person with a backpack walks away from the camera. To the right, a small, makeshift structure made of corrugated metal and wood stands on the road. The background shows more buildings and a forested hillside under a cloudy sky.

A Liberia Case Study

ZOAC's journey towards a

Responsible Program Exit

through Local Empowerment



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Introduction

ZOA operates within contexts characterised by state fragility, conflict, and climate-related disasters. Our focus is on providing relief and recovery assistance to people affected by armed conflict or natural disasters. ZOA prioritises areas where our interventions can have the greatest impact and aim to reach the most vulnerable populations. Our goal is to help communities rebuild their livelihoods and enhance their resilience in the face of shocks and threats. With a dual mandate of relief and recovery, we remain engaged until the context stabilises. As programs transition towards a more development-oriented approach, ZOA plans to phase out and redirect its efforts to address other crises. Throughout our interventions, we prioritise collaboration with communities and local organisations, recognising the importance of local ownership and supporting local capacity.

We prioritize equitable partnerships where roles and responsibilities are jointly defined, ensuring that all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making processes. This collaborative approach not only enhances the effectiveness of ZOA’s interventions but also increases the sustainability of our work post-phasing out. By exchanging knowledge, skills, and funding with local actors, ZOA empowers them to sustain and continue the approaches initiated by our organization. During the transition of responsibilities to local actors, they assume leadership roles in managing and sustaining projects, ensuring their continued success beyond ZOA’s presence.

In this paper, ZOA presents a concrete example from its work in Liberia, highlighting the development and implementation of a phase-out strategy designed to achieve a sustainable transition.

ZOA Liberia

In 2003, ZOA began its program in Liberia to support people rebuild their lives after 14 years of civil war. Then in 2014, the Ebola epidemic hit West Africa. The recovery from the war and the Ebola crisis has been slow, with multiple challenges. Throughout these years, ZOA and its partners have provided support in various sectors, including Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL), Education (EDU), and Peacebuilding including the Community Based Sociotherapy methodology (CBS).

In 2017, ZOA decided to start its phase-out from Liberia, closing its offices and programs by early 2023. Central to ZOA’s mission is a dual mandate of ‘relief and recovery’, signifying that as programs evolve towards a development-oriented approach, it is the moment to gradually phase out. The vision during the phase-out in Liberia was twofold: 1) **Integrating** ZOA’s peacebuilding, WASH, and FSL **programs to increase impact.** 2) **Achieving sustainable outcomes through responsible partnership strengthening.**

After 20 years of dedicated relief and recovery efforts, ZOA has successfully concluded its work in Liberia, leaving behind a legacy of supporting communities and local partners to build resilience and achieve self-sufficiency.



Partners in Liberia

Throughout the years, ZOA Liberia has worked together with various local and national actors, and organisations of different sizes, across the different sectors. A significant part of the programs was carried out in collaboration with local non-governmental organisations (NGO) and Civil Society Organisations (CSO), ensuring sustainability and a lasting impact.

At the governmental level, ZOA Liberia closely collaborated, besides all respective line ministries and local authorities, specifically with the Liberia Peacebuilding Office (PBO) in the implementing of peacebuilding programs. This Office falls under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and is the main office to coordinate all peacebuilding initiatives in Liberia.

Partnerships were established with national NGOs such as Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Liberia and Angie Brooks International Centre (ABIC), with whom ZOA collaborated on peacebuilding initiatives.

ZOA Liberia's collaborative efforts also extended into consortia with international NGOs, in which ZOA collaborated with national partners such as Self-Help Initiative for Sustainable Development (SHIFSD) in the areas of education and Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), and with Liberia Agency for Community Development (LACD) to work on food security initiatives.

Lastly, recognising the importance of partnering with the private sector in sustainable development, ZOA collaborated with agro-processors through which agricultural initiatives and school feeding programs were combined.

Contextualised Programs Strategy

Considering ZOA's dual mandate in relief and recovery, having a tailored phase out strategy is vital, ensuring the responsible conclusion of our programs in different countries. This strategy must leave a positive, lasting impact that includes building resilience of targeted communities.

ZOA aims to do more than just involve local groups and organisations; we are working towards boosting their capacities, leadership and ownership, by jointly discussing the ending of projects. In this stage of transition, project objectives are being assessed, knowledge is exchanged, future project funding explored, and responsibility is increasingly transferred to local partners, aiming for the long-term sustainability of initiatives. In collaborating with local actors, emphasis is placed on empowering local communities to be self-sufficient and drive their own development.

In phasing out, ZOA considers the needs and wishes of its local staff, initiating discussion within the organisation, particularly engaging with local staff to explore their roles post-exit.

Understanding the potential funding challenges faced by local NGOs, ZOA provides support in proposal writing and budgeting, and reviewing when deemed necessary. This assistance is crucial, as local NGOs may encounter obstacles in funding acquisition. By providing continued guidance, ZOA aims to empower local organisations to overcome these challenges. ZOA also takes practical steps to transfer assets like vehicles, laptops and office furniture to local partners. This support helps fortify their infrastructure and promotes sustainability.

To summarise, ZOA's country programs exit strategy is a comprehensive, contextualised plan focused on empowering local actors, ensuring a lasting positive impact, and fostering self-sufficiency within the communities served.



ZOA's exit from Liberia

Pre-exit planning

ZOA Liberia's phase out was a carefully put together process that was set in motion well before the actual closing of offices and departure, emphasising pre-exit planning and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. During the phase out years (2017-2023), there was a deliberate effort made to connect to local organisations with similar sectoral expertise and mandate. ZOA was even more intentional in supporting local partners by enhancing their capacity through training, skill development, and knowledge exchange. This contributed to their improved ability to manage projects independently. Project development was done in a collaborative manner through joint project proposals and activities with local partners, which reflects the importance of shared decision-making. Over time, local partners assumed an increasingly guiding role, expanding their involvement in project portfolios and assuming even more responsibilities.

Support local partners

To support local partners, resources such as funding and assets were allocated during collaboration, with an increasing emphasis during the phase-out period, as operational costs for local NGOs were often not covered. This support enabled them to sustain their operations and initiatives.

Support was also provided to gain recognition from potential donors, and other entities, as this was prioritised as most urgent by the local partners. To achieve this, ZOA supported partner staff with proposal writing and policy creation.

YMCA Liberia, for example, received funding from the Swedish government, and LACD has received funding from other international organisations and institutional donors.

Sustainability of the work

The collaboration between ZOA and its local partners played a pivotal role in the sustainability of the work that was done before phasing out. This is, among other examples, visible in the current ability of Destiny Women (a small business, one of the women led agro-processors groups) to provide training to other women's groups, contributing to the empowerment of other women, and reinforcing self-sufficiency and its own sustainability. For example, each member of Destiny Women receives a salary out of the cooperative business, and they confidently assert: "We can make it".

Sustainable initiatives were also achieved through the establishment of small businesses. During the scaling down of ZOA Liberia's WASH programme, local service providers were supported to formalise their own business. They learned the technique of manual drilling, enabling them to create wells of 10 to 20 meters deep using simple equipment, providing access to safe drinking water. These service providers were equipped with the necessary tools to carry out this work.

Enhancing women's leadership and participation

Four CSOs, namely Impact Girls, Bong County Women Organization, Young Women Christian Association, and Liberia National Rural Women Structure collaborated with ZOA Liberia on the implementation of a project aimed at enhancing women's leadership and participation in civic and political life.

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has made a significant difference for women in (rural) communities, as many of them feel a positive shift in attitudes towards women's participation in civic and political life. Their confidence, knowledge, and skills have improved. The AI approach redirects attention from focusing on what is not working and

attempting to solve it, to identifying what is already working well. This approach fuels the generation of new ideas and solutions while strengthening current approaches. AI facilitates transformational change in norms, particularly regarding women's involvement in leadership and decision-making processes, which is fundamental to establishing peaceful and flourishing societies.

As part of our phase-out ZOA aimed to embed the AI approach within local organizations and to strengthen women leadership in local government for a lasting impact. The impact was visible for example, by women having an increased interest in leadership roles and initiatives and taking up leadership roles in various community and local government settings.

"ZOA worked with us throughout the years. Their support helped us build our business and capacity. We feel like we can now be independent; we can work for ourselves." (Destiny Women)



Case study - Sustaining Peace through Development Initiatives

As ZOA prepared to phase out its operations in Liberia, ZOA's Liberian staff expressed a strong commitment to carrying on the work that had already been accomplished. This would not only allow them to leverage their expertise but also build upon the progress that had been made. Regular meetings were held with national staff and representatives, which eventually transitioned into discussions about the formation of a local organisation. From the discussions on the possibilities to do so, Sustaining Peace through Development Initiatives (SPDI), a national NGO, was established in May 2021. The initiative of starting SPDI started 1.5 years before the actual phase-out of ZOA Liberia. SPDI's formation presented an opportunity to build upon ZOA and partner's achievements, expanding the impact, continuing to foster economic and livelihood opportunities for communities, and peacebuilding efforts. The establishment of SPDI reflects a genuine commitment from national staff to continue the successfully utilised approaches.

The positive peacebuilding initiatives impact was sustained and expanded by SPDI as they continued with new programs utilising similar approaches. SPDI is currently engaged in peacebuilding training, fostering social cohesion, and offering training in political participation, advocacy, and non-violence during elections. SPDI also focusses on promoting the inclusion of women, youth and people with disabilities, empowering them in local leadership roles. They have furthermore set up education booths for accurate election-related information and provide microfinance skill training. Localisation is a top priority for SPDI, involving local communities and leaders in planning and implementing programs tailored to the specific needs and context of each community.

The establishment of SPDI before ZOA's exit from Liberia facilitated close collaborative efforts to stimulate where feasible the sustainability of SPDI. Throughout its setup, ZOA provided support, including assistance with registration and proposal writing, donor networking and policy development. Additionally, assets like a vehicle and laptops were donated after phasing out.

Despite facing challenges in securing funding, SPDI has managed to keep its programs running with support from the Irish Aid, a former donor of ZOA in Liberia. This donor expressed interest in working with SPDI and linked them with Catholic Relief Services, with whom they are currently working. This can be regarded as a significant achievement for a new national NGO.

SPDI furthermore maintains strong networks with the government, local leaders and other NGO's. They actively participate in national conferences and collaborate with various stakeholders, and aim to continue, or even scale impactful projects. It shows their organisational ability to sustain the organisation and agility to adapt to changes.



ZOA was very supportive in the establishment of SPDI. ZOA provided furniture, technical support and 6 months' rent for our office space. Also, ZOA linked us with our current donor (Irish Aid) and supported the staff of SPDI with proposal writing.

(Paul Pantoe Najue, Executive Director of SPDI, 2023)

Conclusion

The Liberia case study underscores the transformative potential when collaboration, resilience, and the empowerment of local communities, including (small) businesses and local organisations is prioritised, acknowledging that they are the prime stakeholders and owners of the change process.

ZOA's exit from Liberia exemplifies a commitment to sustainable impact and local empowerment. Through a well-planned, gradual phase-out approach and a focus on localisation, local stakeholders were empowered, fostering their capacities and ownership. The establishment of SPDI showcases resilience and sustained impact under local leadership.

ZOA's phased exit was only made possible through the collaboration with our much-appreciated Liberian Partners.

Best practices

"The conclusion of ZOA's program in Liberia has generated numerous best practices that we believe are crucial to consider when transitioning out of a program in a country."

Ensure a well-planned, gradual, tailored phase-out strategy

Ensure a well-planned, gradual, tailored phase-out strategy, through investing time in exploring local options for the continuation of programmes. ZOA recognises the importance of a customised phase-out strategy that ensures the responsible conclusion of programs, leaving a positive and lasting impact on local communities. This involves liaising with all (local) partners, careful planning, knowledge transfer, and a focus on long-term sustainability, emphasising the goal of empowering local communities to drive their own development.

Strengthen local capacity and ownership

Strengthen local capacity and ownership through a transformative approach on localisation. Not by merely involving local(s) (organisations), but aiming to enhance local capacities, leadership and ownership. It is imperative to take into account..." to empower local actors to take the lead in the management of their own projects, leaving only a supporting role for ZOA.

Strengthening the capacity of local organisations

Strengthening the capacity of local organisations through investing in an equal partnership, efforts to building each other's capacity, connecting with local initiatives, and exchange of knowledge, enabling them to continue their work with outcomes of interventions

that are durable and adaptable to the evolving needs of the local community. And, whenever possible, by equipping local organisations with assets to carry out their work.

Support opportunities to establish own businesses or a non-governmental organisation (NGOs)

Empowering local staff and communities with specific expertise and skills is fostering sustainable results. When applicable, support genuine commitment from national staff to initiate a new local NGO, ensuring the continuation of successfully employed (peacebuilding) approaches that may not be adopted by other actors.

Support local partners in networking

Support local NGOs in establishing networks with donors, as it enhances their capacity to apply for and secure their own sustainable funding.

Focus on sustainability

A successful phase-out lies in the sustainability of results rather than the mere transfer of projects. The focus is on ensuring durable outcomes adaptable to the evolving needs of the local community. ZOA's role is to empower local organisations, ensuring they have capacity to continue the work independently.



Lesson learned & challenges

Ensure visibility

Ensure visibility for local partners during programme implementation, because this will stimulate recognition. Small local organisations often face challenges when it comes to funding, and visibility can eventually build reputation for international funding eligibility.

Properly estimate importance of support

Do not underestimate the importance of supporting and stimulating (new) local NGOs in securing funding for their programmes. Building up of a portfolio requires time; for instance, through proposal writing support, organisational strategy development, and liaison with potential donors and partners.

Cover core/operational costs

It is important to cover core/operational costs of local organisations. The fact that core costs of local organisations are often covered on project basis means that when the project ends, the organisation does not have funds anymore to cover running costs for offices etc. and to continue to pay salaries of core staff.

The information presented in this paper is derived from a review of project documentation, interviews conducted with partners and former ZOA Liberia staff, and evaluations of partnerships.

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We were here

Liberia