

Community at Odds in Liberia: An Introduction to Conflict Mapping

Experiential Learning Activity (ELA)
Guide for Instructors

The Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project

ELA Overview

This activity is an introduction to conflict mapping and data evaluation. The exercise asks students to conduct a basic conflict assessment in the town of Voinjama, Liberia following deadly clashes that strained community relations. In this activity students are divided into four groups and asked to map the conflict based on the data that they are provided. The students are not aware that each group is given slightly different information. Once each group completes its map and presents its analysis to the class, differences in each group's assessments become apparent. This disconcerting moment allows students to begin to consider how the information they have shapes their understanding of conflict dynamics. The debrief for the activity engages students in a discussion about the complexity of conflict, the process of data gathering and evaluation, and how the data gathered shapes the assessment of a conflict.

The development of each ELA represents the collective effort of faculty and project staff of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. The primary author of Community at Odds in Liberia: and Introduction to Conflict Mapping is Dr. Agnieszka Paczynska, who drew an actual field experience in Liberia.

Conflict Mapping

When analyzing conflict dynamics it is essential to recognize that conflicts are multi-dimensional and complex and therefore no single cause can explain a conflict. On the other hand, when designing and implementing an intervention, it is essential for the third party to have a good understanding of the context, identify the relevant actors, and to diagnose the conflict dynamics as accurately as possible. Gathering data, understanding the multiple perspectives of those involved in and affected by the conflict, and assessing and evaluating data, however, can be difficult. Conflict mapping is one tool that can be utilized to organize and analyze the data and to help uncover gaps in knowledge.

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Conflict mapping is a useful tool for third parties designing an intervention in a conflict context. Conflict maps can also facilitate parties to the conflict ability to articulate their understanding of the conflict dynamics and their own perspectives about how to move toward a resolution.

An excellent overview, “Conflict Mapping” by Paul Wehr, is available as part of the International Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict, from the Conflict Research Consortium at University of Colorado at: <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/cmap.htm>. ■

Learning Outcomes

This Experiential Learning Activity has been designed to help students:

- Understand the relationship between theory and practice.
- Link the analysis of conflict dynamics with the collection of data.
- Recognize and address gaps in data.
- Consider the potential impact of data groups on conflict analysis.
- Explore the use of maps as creative, visual representations of conflict analysis.
- Experience and reflect on group dynamics (including resolving conflicts).
- Practice presenting their findings in front of an audience.

Pre-Activity Lecture (45-50 min.)

Depending on the particular learning objectives of a course, the pre-activity lecture will differ. The lecture can emphasize the history of the Liberian civil war (Conflict Summary is included in the instructor’s guide); the dynamics of post-conflict reconstruction; or the process of conducting a conflict assessment and analysis.

- The Conflict Summary is designed to provide students with the context of the Liberian conflict.
- Resources available at the United States Institute of Peace Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations (www.usip.org/peaceops/index.html) can be used as an introduction to post-conflict reconstruction processes.
- The University of Colorado conflict mapping resource can be used as an introduction to conflict mapping.

Activity

Part 1: Analysis of Conflict (50 min.)

Materials needed:

- Student Information Packets for four groups, one packet per student per group
- Supplementary Map/Photo for each group, one packet per group (or electronic access)
- Flip chart paper and colored markers

To begin the exercise, students should be broken up into four groups with classroom space configured to facilitate conversation within groups.

The four groups are:

- Group 1: Ethnic
 - Group 2: Frustrated Youth
 - Group 3: Political and Economic Marginalization
 - Group 4: Religion
- Students should arrange their desks so they are sitting in a tight circle. Ideally, group size should range from three to seven students. If the class is small, fewer groups can be formed and one of the student packets can be eliminated. If the class is very large, the number of groups can be increased with some groups using the same student packets.
 - Each student in each group should be given an information packet that corresponds to his or her group assignment. These are provided in the Student Materials section of this ELA. Each group should also have access to a color copy of the appropriate Supplemental Map/Photo packet (hard copy or electronic resource). Students should not be informed that there are differences between their information packets as the four different packets have been designed to enable the student groups to consider the conflict from different perspectives. The students should not be told the name of their group. Students should only know their group number.

- Students should be asked to develop an analysis and map of the conflict using the guiding questions and information provided in their packet.
- Students should be informed that they will be presenting their maps to the class during the next session.
- Each group should be provided with flip chart paper and markers. Each group should represent their analysis of the conflict on the flip chart paper.
- If students ask questions about the conflict, they should be instructed to focus on the information contained in the packet and the conflict summary.
- At the end of the session, materials should be collected from each group to be returned during the following session unless the exercise is conducted during a long session. In that case, both the analysis and the debrief can be done the same day.

Part 2: Presenting Analysis and Debrief (50 min.)

Materials needed:

- Flip charts from previous session
- Debrief questions (provided or improvised)

Group Presentations (20 minutes)

- Students should get back into their groups from the previous session and the conflict maps should be returned to each group. Students should be given a few minutes to reorient themselves prior to their presentations.
- Each group should present their analysis to the rest of the class. The groups may choose a spokesperson or present as a group, depending upon the class goals for the activity.
- At some point, the students should begin to realize that their analyses are different. Questions about this should be saved for the debrief session.

Debrief (30 minutes)

The debrief and reflection takes place after each group has presented its conflict map. The debrief for this activity is designed to be flexible and will vary from class to class depending upon course learning objectives and the students' experience. The following questions can be used as prompts for discussion. Instructors should supplement this list with additional questions that align with their specific learning objectives.

1. How did you evaluate the information you were provided?
2. How did you assess the importance of the information provided in the newspaper accounts? In interviewees' statements?

3. Which information did you choose to use for the conflict map and why?
4. What information did you discard and why?
5. Did you think you had sufficient information to map the conflict?
6. If not, why did you think there were gaps in your knowledge?
7. What kind of gaps did you identify?
8. What kind of information would you need to collect to fill in these knowledge gaps?
9. If you thought you had sufficient information, what made you confident that you did?
10. How did the information you had shape the map that your group produced?
11. How might your map shape your analysis of the conflict or your decision about how to intervene?
12. Did creating a map help with your analysis?
13. Now that you have seen every group's map, what do you think about the process of gathering information needed to map a conflict?
14. Describe the dynamics of your group during this process.

Supplemental Activity: Identifying and Addressing Data Gaps

- If time permits, students should form new groups comprised of representatives of each of the original groups.
- Each group should be given a new sheet of flip chart paper and asked to identify the data that was missing from their original analysis and to produce a new map based on more complete information.
- Students should identify what additional data they think they would need to collect in order to produce a more complete analysis of the conflict; and how they would go about collecting this additional data.
- Each group should present their revised maps to the whole class.
- The presentations should be followed by a discussion about the process of identifying knowledge gaps; how data collection can help fill those gaps; and how to conduct conflict analysis without having all the potentially relevant data.

Evaluating the Activity

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of this in-class ELA, students can be asked to provide feedback on the activity via an online discussion sometime during the week after it concludes. Some questions to ask may include:

1. Did this exercise contribute to your understanding of the conflict itself?
2. Did this exercise help you in understanding the process of conflict mapping?
3. How do you think the group worked together?
4. How would you describe and assess your role in the group?
5. How would you describe the roles of others?
6. How would you evaluate the communication between members of the group during the exercise?
7. Were there disagreements? If so, how did the group resolve them?

8. What was the most demanding or challenging part of this conflict mapping activity for you? Why?
9. What was the most simple or uncomplicated part of this conflict mapping activity for you? Why?
10. Did you find this activity engaging? If so, how?
11. What did you learn from participating in this activity?
12. What would you keep and what would you change about this activity?

- Students can be asked to write a reflection paper of their experience conducting conflict mapping through this exercise.
- Video recording of the sessions and analysis of the flip chart sheets can also be used in evaluating the exercise.

Conflict Summary: Liberia Overview

Geography

Liberia is located in West Africa and is bordered by Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, and has over 500 miles of shoreline on the North Atlantic Ocean. It covers an area of 43,000 square miles, making it slightly larger than Ohio. Geographically, the country can be divided into four distinct regions: the coastal plains, wooded, rolling hills, tropical forests and plateaus, and the northern highlands.

Natural Resources and the Economy

The country is rich in a number of natural resources including: iron ore, rubber, timber, diamonds, gold and tin and there may also be large deposits of crude oil along the Atlantic coast. In the early 20th century, foreign investors developed the mining sector as well as rubber and timber production. These became Liberia's key export commodities. During the civil war, these natural resources were captured by the various armed factions, which enabled the financing of men and weapons. Since the 2005, the country has been slowly reconstructing its economy. In 2008, the GDP grew by 9.6%. International commerce had grown significantly, with rubber dominating exports.

Subsistence agriculture dominates in the rural areas. Primary agricultural commodities produced include: cocoa, sugarcane, rice, cassava, palm oil, bananas, plantains, citrus, pineapple, sweet potatoes, corn and vegetables. However, in 2003 the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimated that only 10 percent of arable land was under cultivation.

Population

In 2010 the population of Liberia was about 3.9 million.¹ Monrovia, the capital had a population of over 1 million. Other principle towns include: Ganta, population 41,000, Buchanan, population 34,000, Gbarnga, population 34,000, Kakata, population 33,000 and Voinjama, population 26,000. About 60 percent of Liberian's live in urban areas.²

The population belongs to 16 ethnic groups: 20% are Kpelle, 16% Bassa, 8% Gio, 7% Kru and 49% are spread over 12 other smaller groups. The Americo-Liberians who have historically dominated the country's political and economic life comprise about 5 percent of the population. The Liberian population is currently growing at a rate of 3.3% per annum and majority of Liberians are under 18 years of age.³

English is the country's official language, but 17 indigenous languages are also spoken as is Liberian English. The use of English is not distributed evenly across the country. In terms of religion, 40% of Liberians are Christian, 20% are Muslim and 40% are animist.

In 2011 Almost 64 percent of the country's population lived in extreme poverty and 78.7% of Liberians were employed in the informal sector.⁴ Even almost a decade after the end of the civil war, illiteracy remained a challenge. Forty two percent of women and 18 percent of men have never attended a school.⁵

History

The area that is now Liberia has been inhabited at least since the 12th century. The population initially grew as the Mende-speaking people expanded to the west, pushing various tribes toward the Atlantic Ocean. Over the next few centuries other peoples migrated as a result of political and economic pressures across West Africa. Starting in late 15th century, European empires, and in particular the British, Dutch and Portuguese established trading posts along the coast.

In 1821-22, the American Colonial Society established a colony in the coastal areas as a place where freed American slaves could build a new home. The settlers migrating to the colony came to be known as Americo-Liberians. In 1847 the colony became the independent country of Liberia, with the flag, seal and motto reflecting the settlers' American heritage. The lack of integration of the local indigenous population into the political institutions of the new state, their political exclusion and marginalization, set the stage for the persistent tensions between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population that characterized Liberian history throughout the 19th and 20th century.

Prior to 1980, Liberia was dominated by a single party and the state remained firmly in the control of the Americo-Liberians. By the late 1970s mass opposition to the regime emerged, with a newly mobilized Liberian society demanding an end to one-party rule.⁶

1 World Bank. (data.worldbank.org/country/Liberia).

2 CIA. The World Factbook. 2008 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>).

3 World Bank. Africa Development Indicators 2011. Washington, DC: World Bank, October 2011.

4 Government of Liberia and United Nations Development Program. Millenium Development Goals 2010 Report: Progress, Prospects, and Challenges: Towards Achieving the MDGs. Monrovia: Government of Liberia and United Nations Development Program, 2011, 5.

5 *ibid*, 16.

6 Afrobarometer, "Popular Opinions on Democracy in Liberia, 2008," Afrobarometer Briefing Paper no. 73, October 2009.

In April 1980 Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, a Krahn, and an army composed mostly of indigenous Liberians, staged a coup. Doe, the first non-Americo-Liberian leader of the country, established a brutal, authoritarian state, outlawing opposition political parties, tightly controlling the media and jailing political opponents.

The brutality and repression of the Doe regime and the continued political and economic marginalization of the majority of Liberian population contributed to the eruption of the first Liberian civil war in 1989 when an Americo-Liberian, Charles Taylor, heading the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and with the support of the local indigenous population invaded Nimba county. Over the next few years, as other military factions emerged the country was ravaged by a civil war. In 1990 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent in military force in an attempt to stop the fighting.

In 1997 Charles Taylor was elected president of Liberia. Peace, however, was fragile and the continued repression of the Taylor regime and the lack of an effective demobilization program, led to a new round of fighting in 1999. The second civil war came to an end in 2003 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Accra, Ghana. Taylor resigned and went into exile in Nigeria, before being arrested in 2006 and brought to trial before the Special Court for Sierra Leone in the Hague. In 2012, Taylor was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to 50 years in prison. In the 2005, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who had spent the previous decades working as an economist at the World Bank was elected President. Liberia began the process of building democracy and reconstructing the country. Sirleaf, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, was re-elected for a second term that same year.

Impact of the Civil Wars, 1989-2003

The two civil wars in Liberia, which lasted from 1989 to 2003, devastated the country's economy, reducing its GDP by 90 percent and pushing 75 percent of the population below the poverty line. Most commonly cited estimates report that 250,000 Liberians were killed during the conflict,. Others suggest that as many as 400,000 may have perished. Additionally, two million became refugees or internally displaced. The war also had a devastating impact on the country's educational system, with 75% of the educational infrastructure damaged or destroyed, resulting in educational services essentially disappearing. At the same time, the public health care system also collapsed, leading to the widespread existence of communicable diseases.

A 2009 survey provides a view of the personal impact of the conflict on Liberians. Fully 96% of respondents said they personally felt the impact of the civil war. 90% had to leave their homes; 86% lost contact with close family members; 83% said their home were looted and 76% had their food taken away by armed groups; 74% had their property significantly damaged; 69% said they lost a family member in the conflict; 55% said they were humiliated during the war; 45% reported having been tortured and 51% indicated that someone close to them was a victim of sexual violence.¹ ■

Click [Here](#) for Student Information Packets.

¹ IPSOS/ICRC. Liberia: Opinion Survey and in-Depth Research 2009. Geneva: International Committee for the Red Cross, December 2009.

About the Project

This Experiential Learning Activity (ELA) has been developed as part of the Undergraduate Experiential Learning Project (UELP), U.S. Department of Education, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)-funded initiative that aims to enhance Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CAR) pedagogy in order to improve undergraduate learning.

The CAR field is uniquely positioned to deliver educational experiences that help students make the crucial link between abstract theories and practical application through learning activities such as: conflict mapping, intervention design, role plays, and simulations. The ELAs developed as part of the UELP advance specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, problem solving, and perspective taking.

Each ELA produced through the UELP has been designed either to augment existing course curricula or to be used as a stand-alone activity. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of their specific learning environments, including class size and course objectives.

All UELP project materials are available for public use and may be reproduced without permission. Please ensure that all printed materials display both the FIPSE and George Mason University logos as well as the project URL (<http://scar.gmu.edu/experientiallearningproject/home>).

As your partners in advancing undergraduate education, we are committed to improving the quality of the learning experience and encourage all feedback and recommendations to support that commitment. Additionally, we welcome stories that highlight moments of student insight that arise from participation in these activities. If you are interested in supporting the collection of data for ongoing research, please contact us through our webpage. ■



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