



Dealing with drug problem from public health and human rights perspectives

A major weakness in the national reform process in Liberia

An Article By Julius J. Togba
Research Officer
FADCA

To end Liberia's fourteen years of civil war, the United Nations launched the Demobilization, Disarmament, Reintegration and Rehabilitation (DDRR) Program for former fighters as a major strategy for ending violence and restoring civil order in the country. While the success of the DDRR program is laudable for reducing the wave of military violence in the country, probably attributed to the presence of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the means and substance used by former war lords to affect the rationality and instill bravery in the fighters has yet to be dealt with. These fighters were children and adolescents conscripted and indoctrinated into the illicit use of drugs. Their former masters, the war lords are now rewarded politically but do not create enabling environment through public policy frameworks that would address their condition of drug addiction. The country does not have laws or any reform process that address public health and human rights issues associated with the drug abuse habit and behavior of these former fighters. Consequently they pose threat to peace and stability as they remain "soldiers of fortune"; and they have adequate ability to promote the spread of HIV from two fronts: 1) they can commercialize their bodies through same sex to generate the needed resources to support their habit and 2) as a hidden population of intravenous drug users, they always use one needle to inject drug.

United Nations' intervention strategy for the Liberian conflict had three pronged approaches: Disarmament, Recovery and Reconstruction. It is around these precepts that various strategic documents were written in successive order. The documents including the Peace Building Priority Plan, Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), Agenda for Transformation (AfT), etc. are being supported locally and international to ensure that the country does not experience relapse. In these documents there is nothing envisioned to address the human rights and health conditions of a segment of population that has been programmed as vehicle for instability. Except the public health law which emphasizes criminalization of illicit drug usage punishable by imprisonment without rehabilitation, Liberia does not have any law in her public policy books as a drug reform regime. Consequently anybody caught by state security actors in relation to perceived 'drug crime' is sent to prison with little or no legal proceedings. The Bureau of Correction and Rehabilitation which has oversight responsibility for prisoners does not have any rehabilitation program. This is a chain of vulnerability of state resilience and stability.

Upon approval of the peacebuilding Priority Plan in 2008, United Nations Peace Building Fund intervention is stratified around three themes: 1) Foster National Reconciliation and Conflict

Management, II) Critical Interventions to Promote Peace and III) Resolve Conflict and Strengthen State Capacity for Peace Consolidation. Several projects have been implemented under each thematic area, with project management and implementation oversight given to various UN agencies and international NGOs. For example, the Tumutu Project designed to rehabilitate ex-combatants and children associated with fighting forces through skill training such as agriculture, soap making, carpentry, textile design (tie dye), etc. has ended successfully without plan to disabuse the minds of ex-combatants of the usage of illicit drugs and its social and economic impact. Another project is the Public Defender which aimed at strengthening government's capacity to provide free legal services for those who cannot afford to hire lawyers amidst backlog of cases on court dockets. While lawyers empowered (through training, salaries and logistics) are still in service there is no trace of history where these lawyers ever defended any citizen arrested and detained in relations to alleged illicit drug crime or advocated for any legal remedy to the situation of drug end users who are "perceived criminals" especially during holiday seasons. The issue of drug law and policy reform in the context of human rights and public health in Liberia remains catalyst for instability if not a latent conflict. Truth of this proposition cannot be debated for two of many reasons:

1. In the face of the lone provision in the public health law which labels people caught in possession or usage of "illicit drugs" as criminals, there is a disparity of treatment for drug traffickers and end users. State security actors particularly Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), National Security Agency (NSA) and Liberia National Police (LNP) treat drug traffickers (usually caught with huge quantity) with less seriousness and punishment, while end users of drugs are treated with brutal and severe measures. There are instances where traffickers are treated as if they are part of a cartel, which agents and lords are seated in government. But locals who have been drugged to fight fourteen years of war are treated with the highest gruesome revulsion of human rights abuse with no form of reparation or rehabilitation, while their former masters (some of whom also drug lords) sit in the same government. Why should one person who committed a higher gravity of a crime be given less punishment and another person who committed less gravity of the same crime be given higher punishment. This is shared weakness on the part of the criminal justice system in the face of millions of dollars investment in reform processes.
2. End users of drugs in Liberia are still loyalist of war lords or anyone or group of people who may have intension to cause instability. Mano River Union and ECOWAS governments should bear in mind that these are the same people referred to as "soldiers of fortune" in international conflict transformation literature and discourse. In as much as they have not been rehabilitated and their rights are being violated, they remain assessable war machines for intra-state or inter-state violence.

At present, Liberians are not sure of the mandate of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in the context of whether the agency was established for public good or to monster "perceived enemies" of people in government. The essence of this question is attributed to recent wave of violence in which the DEA was caught in the picture as the perpetrator. Three instances of violent actions by the DEA against citizens include:

1. DEA former Deputy Director for Operations broke the leg of a teenager in the name of pursuing alleged drug dealers in 2013. Family members of the teenage girl cried and called on government for redress to no avail.

2. Again in 2013 seven crop farms belonging to some locals in Bentor outside Monrovia were burned by DEA in the name of getting rid of marijuana. This action has left several families without food and other means of sustenance. A trace of evidence for the presence of marijuana on those farms is yet to be established.

3. It is customary in Monrovia that during every Christmas DEA and LNP round up perceived drug users and or criminals and detain them at the Monrovia Central Prison only to be released during the first week in January of the following year. Additionally, any time there is a threat of demonstration (be it peaceful or whatever), the government orders police to round up suspected criminals from their hideouts for fear that there may be looting during the demonstration. The demonstrations are usually political, but “perceived drug users” usually go to prison for plans they know nothing about. This is a gross violation of their rights to freedom of movement and unjust treatment under international law.

The global community is now convinced that the war against drugs has failed. Governments must act within the confines of public health and human rights in the development of public policy regarding drug issue. The human rights of drug users and local farming communities growing drug crops are rarely even mentioned in political discussions, whether at the domestic or UN level. Yet in many countries, drug control efforts result in serious human rights abuses: torture and ill treatment by police, mass incarceration, executions, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, and denial of basic health services. In the case of Liberia which is still a weak and fragile state, public health and human rights remain major challenge to government. By and large, failure of the government and her international partners to address the condition of ex-combatants or vulnerable youth who have limited skills and thus unemployment could derail the peace and stability of Liberia and the West African Region.