EMPOWERING CHILDREN THROUGH «INCLUSIVE» EARLY GRADE READING (ECIR)

Country in which the project will take place: Liberia
Region: Maryland County

Responsible Organization: Non-profit Association - Arise From Ashes Suisse (AFA) - c/o Maison Internationale des Associations, Rue des Savoises 15, 1205 Geneva - www.arise-from-ashes.org; contact@arise-from-ashes.org

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Literacy has transcended simple reading and writing – it evolves with society. Literacy breaks down many barriers. Literacy is a tool which facilitates the use of languages, figures, images, computers, science, etc. to understand (comprehend), interact with ease and acquire knowledge. It facilitates access to our ever evolving society – communication and technology!
Literacy is central to education as a basic human right with its many advantages for human development. Unfortunately, not every school can afford to deliver quality literacy education due to poverty and other factors. Literacy supports all subjects in schools: languages, mathematics, arts & crafts, science, geography, etc. Literacy is first "learning to read" and then "reading to learn".
Through ECIR, AFA will work with other entities to ensure that children from poor and remote parts of Liberia receive quality education as an asset towards self-development in the future. This pilot project will be implemented in four major phases within a year (March 2023 – March 2024): *pre-assessment, training of teachers and school administration, teaching students from K2 – Grade 3, post-assessment (monitoring and evaluation)*. A Refresher training for teachers will be conducted at the end of the project (February 2024).
AFA selected the Liberia Reads (LR!) format for this project.

Project Phases: March 2023 – March 2024

Total Budget: CHF 29'695

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1. Historical, Socio-economic and Demographic Contexts

Liberia is a country in West Africa with approximately 4.5 million inhabitants
A deadly and devastating civil war lasted for nearly 15 years between 1989 and 2003. While Liberia was still struggling to recover from the war, the Ebola epidemic outbreak in 2014 further crippled all efforts to rebuild the country. The government had to declare a state of emergency.
Due to these two disasters (war and Ebola), the government was obliged to close down schools in the country, depriving children access to education for several very long periods. Many qualified Teachers fled the country for security and never returned. Many development agencies focusing on education in Liberia had to comply by repatriating their personnel.

All efforts were focused on saving lives and attending to health emergencies. According to numerous sources, including the *International Monetary Fund (IMF)* and *the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*, although Liberia is Africa's oldest republic, it remains to date, one of the least developed and poorest countries on the continent. In Liberia, approximately 64% of Liberians live below the poverty line, and 48% live in extreme poverty (IMF and UNDP).

Although early age children in today's Liberia have not experienced war, contrary to the children from the previous generation, they are also bearing the consequences of the war and Ebola because they inherited dilapidated structures, ravaged education and health systems and live in extreme poverty. These young ones are the focus of this current project proposal. Through ECIR, AFA would like to offer them good quality education (Teachers, Administrators, Materials, Library, literacy program, etc.) to avoid reproducing the predicament today's youth in Liberia find themselves in due to the lack of a solid foundation in literacy and education.

Experience shows that good readers perform better in all subjects in school than bad readers. This is a strong support to future professional life.

2. Education Context

Liberia's weak economy and poverty have alarming consequences, depriving children and youth of good quality education.
Several efforts have been made by the government of Liberia, through the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other national and international entities to address the low illiteracy level of children and youth, but the road to efficiency is still too long. Students across the country (public and private sector schools alike) exhibit alarming weakness in

literacy from primary school to university. Teachers across the country in both the public and private sectors exhibit similar shortcomings due to the effects of the war.

Several major factors contributing to the weakness of the school system are:
• the lack of trained, qualified Teachers – qualified Teachers who fled the country due to the war were replaced by unqualified Teachers;
• the unavailability of textbooks (in some schools only the Teacher has a textbook);
• lack of appropriate learning materials;
• school infrastructure destroyed during the war;
• the lack of support and incentives given to Teachers in Liberia;
• insufficient classrooms - according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the average number of students per class in primary schools in OECD countries is 21. In Liberia, this can triple or even quadruple that figure. For example, in Harper, Maryland County, some public schools have up to 100 students per class in primary schools.
low investment on children's education. For example, in the Video, *Education Reform in Africa* (see bibliography), the former Education Minister indicated that the government spends approximately $50.00 per child/year on education. According to the OECD 2019 indicator, an OECD country can spend approximately 10.500 USD on each student in primary school per year.

As stated previously, all post-war development efforts are concentrated in Monrovia, neglecting other counties. The ratio of qualified teachers in the country also reflects this reality. In counties like Maryland, which have been les served economically, the level of poverty is higher and the ratio of trained teacher is lower compared to Monrovia.

AFA is seeking to assist children from the remotest parts of Liberia and from poorest communities with high literacy rates. These children come from different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Majority do not speak English (Liberia's official language and the official language of instruction in schools) at home, they speak different Liberian languages.They have to work outside school hours to help their parents.

In addition to the above, children do not have the support of their parents in nurturing their literacy skills during their formative years, coupled with the lack of qualified teachers and shortage of learning materials and resources.

3. Vision and Strategy

Promoting social inclusion and empowering all children by providing access to literacy

Vision

AFA would like to contribute to the eradication of poverty through literacy for this generation who will be Liberia's future adults, so as not to reproduce the same illiteracy pattern of today's youth.
AFA's vision is to contribute to an illiteracy-free society and equip the less privileged with the necessary literacy skills to make them reach their full potential in their adult lives with better opportunities to gain economic independence as responsible citizens.
AFA's target groups are children from socially-deprived families in poorer parts of Liberia, especially, Maryland County, where post-war development efforts are scarce due to its remoteness. The main focus, for this project, is to lay a solid foundation for early grade pupils (children between 4 – 10 years), between 250-350 students in Maryland County. AFA would like to reproduce/extend this program to other schools and communities in the county.

Strategy

AFA has observed that inefficient literacy is common to both public and private schools, especially in remote parts of Liberia. AFA's strategy is to adopt a preventive and an inclusive approach – help one, help all!
AFA selected the Liberia Reads! (LR) program (Liberia Reads Project Description – **Available upon request**) in line with its vision. This program is partly sponsored by a Florida-based (United States) organization known as the Children's Reading C enter, Inc. (CRC) and managed by a Liberian organization known as the Association of Literacy Educators (ALE). LR's core value is quality at all levels. The Liberian government has been unable to fund schools for all children and relies on the private sector for assistance. Currently 40% of all enrolled students are in private schools, which usually depend solely on student tuition and fees for operations and support. LR's program has reached out to private schools due to the criteria concerning class size which is still a challenge for public schools. While LR has proven successful and effective within the private school arena in 39 schools from 4 counties, the selection of public schools for AFA's pilot project represents an innovative component. Therefore, three public schools totaling **311 students, 5 principals and 4 teachers** from the poorest communities were selected to be able to impact a minimum number of children in Maryland County. The aim is to equip all beneficiary children for the future and not only children from the private schools.

Trainers from ALE and Evaluators from the Liberia Institute for the Promotion of Academic Excellence (LIPACE) will go to conduct their respective activities in Maryland. This program works better when a minimum number of participants per area are involved because they can share experience during the course of the year and mutually support each other. With this arrangement, very long travel, it is also important to involve minimum number of schools for better impact. This impact will create a good sustainable base for the future.

Program – Liberia Reads! (LR)

Several national and international actors have strived over the years, since the end of the war, to resuscitate the Liberian school system by developing various programs: the government (Ministry of Education), UNICEF, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), LR and USAID.

After evaluating the impact and relevance of each program, AFA decided to use the LR program for several reasons:

1. LR is a primary-grade literacy project sponsored by a Florida-based nonprofit, the Children's Reading Center, Inc. (CRC), supported by the Association of Literacy Educators (ALE), a Liberian affiliate of the International Literacy Association. This means that it is non-political. For AFA, this is a very important factor because the running of the program will not be affected by politics – it will be purely professional;
2. LR was designed by Dr. Geri Melosh, Executive Director of CRC (Former Peace Corps Volunteer) in 2008. Mrs Lyn Gray (former Peace Corps Volunteer) is the Country Director of LR. Dr. Melosh and Mrs. Gray started in 1972 in Liberia and have maintained their bonds with Liberia. This pre- and post-war experience enables them to be easily apt at identifying gaps.
3. LR shares several core values with AFA. AFA's mission is to serve the underprivileged and poor in Liberia. The purpose of the **LR** literacy program is to provide intensive staff development to early grade reading teachers (kindergarten – 3rd grade) who teach in resource-poor classrooms, have limited pedagogical knowledge, and low levels of personal literacy. LR's program is aligned with the Ministry of Education's national curricular standards ;
4. LR takes the cultural dimension (culture and text sensitive) and realities into consideration to conveniently address local needs and challenges. Although instructional materials from America were originally used in the program, now all 1st – 3rd grade guided readers, self-selected leveled readers, and instructional materials are produced in Liberia and reflect the country's rich culture while maintaining an international, evidenced-based curricular scope and sequence. Due to the high demand for the program, all LR materials are now available in-country;
5. LR is an integrated program for teachers, students, administrators (capacity building);
6. **Impact** - **LR assessed 3rd graders in 14 Montserrado schools in last 2 years: they read average of 64 words correct per minute**. USAID international benchmarks 45 words; LTTP II after 2.5 years is 14 words (**Annex available upon request**);
7. **Impact** - in 2022 over 10,000 children are now reading independently with comprehension because of LR! according to Mrs. Lyn Gray (excerpt from the presentation she delivered for Friends of Liberia (https://fol.org/) at the Liberia Studies Association Conference in 2019;
8. It is very cost-effective;
9. Sample of graphs, presented by LR, reflecting Liberia Reads' student outcomes on a variety of revised Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) reading subtests are found in **Annex Available upon request**. Some reflect LR's latest assessments which were done in the spring of 2019 and others reflect somewhat older comparisons in outcomes between recent USAID projects (LTTP and EGRA PLUS), international benchmarks and LR.

Program Structure and Content

This program has two stages:

Stage I: Liberia Reads ! (LR): K2 – 3rd Grades

Training Details of Activities available upon request»).
Curriculum, Content and Teaching Materials:LR curriculum is fully in line with the MOE's curriculum.
Content and Teaching Materials are available upon request (What it Means to be a Liberia Reads ! School).

Stage II: Liberia Reads to Learn (LRL) – 4th - 6th Grades

The LRL Kit is designed to be used in LR schools for 4th-6th grades. USAID and Peace Corps have purchased it for broader use. Descriptive Sheet of LRL (**Liberia Reads to Learn Reading Kits Description**) is available upon request. After a school has used LR for two-three years so that rising 4th graders are able to read independently, 4th-6th grade reading teachers and an administrator will be invited for a 3-day training during which they will be given the kit consisting of 450 reading passages with questions (LRL reading lab, which is part of what schools receive their 3rd year after becoming an LR school). It was written in Liberia and complements the Liberian curriculum. The school can send up to three teachers and one administrator.

This current proposal concerns only Stage I, K2 – 3rd Grade. Although AFA will begin Stage II at a later stage, it will be covered as part of the LR package.

Beneficiaries

Direct beneficiaries of this project will be 1 Coordinator, 12 Teachers, 3 Administrators, 311 early grade students from Kindergarten (K2) to Grade 3, aged 4 – 10 years from Samuel Weah Elementary School, Boryibie Kindergarten & Elementary School in neighboring towns and Ernest Thomas Elementary School, all three in Maryland County.
Indirect beneficiaries of the project will impact the communities at large in two villages, one town and the county. This is a very new concept in the county.

4. Objective of AFA's ECIR Project

Literacy is not only about reading. It offers children better success options for the future. AFA targets underprivileged youth and children in Liberia. The main objective of this project is to improve the quality of foundational literacy to early grade children and Teachers **in three schools in Maryland County**. LR first prepares Teachers and Administrators to carry on the program before the school year begins.

Aims of the program:

- Use literacy as a means to fight poverty in poor and vulnerable communities in Maryland;
- Empower schools in remote disadvantaged communities in Maryland to improve their methodology in Language Arts;
- Develop early grade reading and writing – effective literacy skills;
- Improve literacy levels among children from K2 – 3rd grades through LR Program – building strong foundations – this is why the K2 program gives the students an extra head start with phonics and reading readiness. (**see Annex 4**);
- Ensure improved quality of basic education – reading, writing;
- Strengthen teachers' and school administrators' capacity in teaching literacy methods;
- Create a broad awareness on the benefits of learning literacy to promote community participation in primary school education;
- Support government efforts to harmonize literacy capacity throughout the country.

Details of project activities for 2023 – 2024 with timelines are also available upon request

Implementation of the project will include several phases from pre-assessment, preparatory, implementation, certification through post-assessment:

Phase I – School Selection Criteria Based on LR standards available too

LR's requires a school to have not more than 30 students in K2-3rd Grades, that each class begins the day with 2 ½ hours for the LR program, that selected teachers should be able to read third grade textbooks without difficulty and are likely to stay in the school. All three schools selected have less than 30 children per class according to the LR's criteria. It also requires each school to commit to sending one teacher per class and a principal to participate in a 65-hour training class for the first year and a 20-hour refresher for the second year and to observe LR's minimum standards.

Phase II – Training – Teachers (K2 – 3rd Grade) and Administrators Maryland County

Initial 65-hour training for 8 teachers and 2 principals of K2-3rd Grade over 10 working days in the following topics

a. Phonics (letter/sound correspondence) and phonological awareness;
b. Fluency and Accuracy;
c. Comprehension;

The student curriculum includes three blocks:

a. *Working with Words* (specific phonics and sight word instruction);
b. *Guided Reading* (opportunities to apply phonics skills to reading real books);
c. *Self-Selected Reading* (read aloud and independent reading practice).

Refresher Training, required for all teachers of K2-3rd grade: 21-hour training over 3 days with 2 meals/day, one year after the first training (transportation to training not included).
Replacement Training for teachers or principals hired to replace a LR person who has left: 65-hour training over 10 days.
LR's **capacity building** aims at developing schools. Therefore LR training prepares a team for each school, such that, strong teachers back up weaker ones, prepared teachers are always available when backups are needed. The team also includes the administrator, who must commit to visiting classes and observing each teacher once every marking period with an Observation Sheet LR provides.

Phase III – Pre-assessment – The Liberian Institute for the Promotion of Academic Excellence (LIPACE)

Phase IV – Implementation

Phase V- Post-assessment - LIPACE

Phase VI – Refresher Training

Phase VII – Awareness

5. Justification of the Choice

Dr. Geri Melosh and Mrs. Lyn Gray are former Peace Corps and started living and working in Liberia since the early1970s as Teachers in the Liberian System. This means that, besides the Liberian government, no other international partner (USAIDS, UNICEF, GPE) has the experience they have. Indeed, both observed the evolution of the Liberian society:

a) 70s – Liberia was peaceful, with good infrastructure, quality education and health systems in place;
b) 80s - coup d'état – Liberia began declining since the coup d'état of 1980;
c) 90s – civil war – the first civil war began in December 1989, but was declared in spring 1990;
d) 20s – in 2003 – the war ended.

Peace Corps are by nature humanitarians (good-hearted), resilient and devoted Americans who vow to integrate societies/communities they work in to effectuate meaningful changes based on mutual understanding. Peace Corps are professionals noted for creating lasting bonds with communities the world over. Nearly 250, 000 Peace Corps have sacrificed their work in more than 140 countries around the world.

For AFA, it is obvious that the LR program designed by international professional educators who value the Liberian society and culture are the best option for a successful «*early grade children empowerment through literacy*» project. Their work is straightforward, no stringent bureaucracy, no politics!
The Executive Director of AFA spent her childhood in Liberia and appreciated the work of Peace Corps.
The LR program has a higher middle to high primary school component – Liberia Reads to Learn (LRL) for children in 4th – 6th Grades as indicated under «Program Content and Structure» above. This current project only concerns children attending K2 – 3rd Grades.
The « LRL » component (see **Annex 5**) is being used by Peace Corps, since 2015 and USAID. AFA will begin using it in the third year (2024-2025) with fourth grade.

6. Sustainability

Our approach to sustainability, be it environmental or socio-economic, should include literacy as an important element in awareness raising.
Liberian youth are already experiencing the consequences of illiteracy. This project aims at laying the foundation for tomorrow's adults in Liberia to be literate, educated, responsible and autonomous citizens. This is why it is focused on very young children who will, after primary school, have a solid foundation in reading and writing and will be better equipped for the future.

Based on results from the program performance over the years, LR developed a very solid sustainability plan and developed six sustainability strategies (excerpt from the presentation made by Mrs. Lyn Gray for Friends of Liberia (https://fol.org/) at the Liberia Studies Association Conference in 2019:

1. **Strategy – quality over quantity: small is beautiful**

LR has demonstrably increased impact by resisting urge to go for quantity. Insist on

- limited class size
- Limit # schools trained per year
- Once trained each school and teacher receive intensive follow up indefinitely
- Refresher training year 2.

2. **Strategy - Liberian teachers and principals must be prepared to carry out all the work**

- 19 trained & certified LR trainers from among teachers & principals, with new ones added each year.
- Liberian NGO called LR Association of Literacy Educators (ALE), affiliated with the International Literacy Association; principals or reps come to monthly meetings
    - ALE now manages all LR! training, and organizes reading competitions, Saturday workshops, events like International Literacy Day
    - ALE is supported through member dues, fund raisers, training programs

3. **Strategy - Training cannot stand alone**; trainees must have regular follow up – coaching, practice, feedback, refresher workshops. The Principal is trained to observe and give feedback. Teachers come back for refresher training after one year of practice.

4. **Strategy - Beneficiaries must own the program, making it financially sustainable**.

LR has collaborated with the MOE to offer a certificate course in teaching reading on Saturdays paid for by teachers, similar to private organizations that are now offering C certificates for teaching. This adds another revenue stream to ALE to continue the LR program.

5. **Strategy - Expect turnover of personnel**
This is reality in Liberia, especially among low paid school teachers. LR! offers not only new school training each year but also training for new teachers replacing former LR teachers.

6. **Strategy - Materials must be replaceable and affordable**.
LR's materials are now being produced locally.

7. **Strategy – AFA**

AFA has explored the possibility of working closely with community volunteers who are normally young retired teachers still full of energy, with long years of experience and willing to help improve their community. This will help sustain the project beyond the funding period. This will add value to the profile of the community. More and more Teachers will want to be a part of a qualitative training. In this way, the project will achieve its intended results and benefit as many communities as possible.

Partners

Association of Literacy Educators (ALE)

ALE is a registered Liberian NGO and professional literacy organization founded in 2011 by educators trained in the Liberia Reads! (LR) curriculum. More information available upon request

LOCAL SCHOOL TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Each trained principal or administrator observes every LR teacher in the classroom at least once every marking period, using the LR classroom observation form. This continues at least until each teacher has been in the LR program for 3 years. The administrator works with LR teachers in a group to review methodology that may be challenging to some and discuss issues related to maintaining high standards for Liberia Reads!

Liberian Institute for the Promotion of Academic Excellence (LIPACE)

The Liberia Institute for the Promotion of Academic Excellence is a youth-led Liberian nonprofit organization using data-driven approaches to enable students and teachers to see their tireless efforts lead to increased student achievement

Community

The communities we spoke to are enthusiastic and vowed to provide a meeting point for the community awareness during which AFA will invite Teachers from the ECIR program. The community volunteered to also provide beverages and snacks during the awareness sessions. They have designated each a Focal Point to help spread the information.

Advisors – Dr. Geri Melosh and Lyn Gray