

REPORT ON THE PROVISION OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SERVICES INCLUDING
POST TRAUMATIC COUNSELLING AND HEALING FOR THE INDEPENDENT
NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS (INCHR) IN RIVERCESS
COUNTY, CENTRAL “C” DISTRICT, LIBERIA



CONSULTANCY SERVICES IMPLEMENTED BY THE LIBERIA ASSOCIATION
OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SERVICES(LAPS)
REPORT WRITTEN AND SUBMITTED BY SEIDU SWARAY-Lead Consultant

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ACRONYMS

INCHR	Independent National Commission on Human Rights
LAPS	Liberia Association of Psychosocial Services (LAPS)
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
PH	Palava Hut
PBRSCP	Peace Building, Reconciliation and Social Cohesion Project
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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The consultants would like to thank everyone who gave valuable inputs that helped to achieve success for this psychosocial service provision support to the INCHR's Palava Hearing exercises in Rivercess County.

Thank you to UNDP for the funding and to the INCHR staff who shared their time, experiences and insights with the team and supported our staffs in the field.

Thank you to all the participants(victims and respondents) of the Palava Hut hearing exerices in Sahyah Community,

Thank you to the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support(MHPSS) team at the level of the Rivecess County Health Team for their referral related collaborations.

Finally, I would like to thank the senior and field staffs of LAPS for the invaluable support and activity implementation of the services of this consultancy in Central "C" distict, Rivercess County.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Among the many recommendations made by the TRC of Liberia was a restorative justice model Palava Hut Hearing exercise to provide the fora where the wrongs of the civil war, particularly those violations deemed to be of lesser gravity, can be addressed through truth-telling, atonement and psychosocial recovery, thereby promoting healing and reconciliation at the community and national levels.

The Liberia Association of Psychosocial Services (LAPS) provided a consultancy service to the Palava hut hearing exercise aimed at supporting the exercise to meet its expected results of reconciling communities to peacefully coexist and utilize the Palava Hut system/approach to settle their differences in Rivercess County, Republic of Liberia.

During the onset of the implementation processes of the consultancy, LAPS conducted desk reviews and held consultations with the UNDP and the INCHR in the direction of understanding the goals and objectives of the palava hut hearing exercise as well as, plans leading to the implementation of the palava hut hearing exercises in Central C district in Rivercess County.

Based on the above, LAPS recruited and prepared its psychosocial team who later offered quality psychosocial services and care to about 45 victims(19 females, 26 males) and 34 perpetrators/respondents(2 females, 26 males) before, during and after appearing at the palava hut hearing exercise. Moreover, about 49 cases were identified out of which, 48 were resolved with one case dismissed.

Based on the contextual realities of the project sites, an advanced team made up of senior staffs of LAPS travelled and initiated all project start up preparations prior to the commencement of the palava hut hearing exercises in the various targeted project sites. Moreover, a work plan with related timelines and Schedule of work covering the entire consultancy intervention period of services to targeted beneficiaries before the start, during and after the palava hut hearing exercise, was formulated and aligned with the INCHR's plans.

LAPS also built collaboration relationships with the mental health Clinicians of the MHPSS team based in Rivercess County for the purpose of referring cases that may need mental health services that are beyond the scope of the services of this consultancy and for continuum of care as and when the need arises.

And, LAPS also ensured that, its staffs and beneficiaries adhere to the practicing of the COVID 19 preventive measures at all time during the entire consultancy implementation processes.

Besides, stress management and self-care related techniques were taught and used as exit and sustainability support to the targeted beneficiaries.

LAPS also supported and facilitated training on vicarious trauma to staffs of the INCHR.

A. INTRODUCTION

The 14 years civil war in Liberia left thousands of Liberians tortured raped, traumatized and, over two hundred thousand dead. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up in Liberia in 2005 to identify and recommend ways of addressing the causes and perpetrators of the war. The TRC took nearly 20,000 statements and conducted public hearings in the 15 counties of Liberia. The TRC report records Rivercess County as having a total of 30 mass graves, the second highest number of mass graves per county in Liberia. At the close of its work, the TRC made and submitted about 142 recommendations to the National Legislature. Among the many recommendations was a restorative justice model Palava Hut Hearing exercise to provide the fora where the wrongs of the civil war, particularly those violations deemed to be of lesser gravity, can be addressed through truth- telling, atonement and psychosocial recovery, thereby promoting healing and reconciliation at the community and national levels.

B. TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE CONSULTANCY

This consultancy is aimed at supporting the Palava Hut hearing exercise to meet its expected results of reconciling communities to peacefully coexist and utilize the Palava Hut system/approach to settle their differences in Rivercess County, Republic of Liberia.

Amongst other things, the consultancy achieved its term of reference in the following ways:

- Facilitated the psychological/mental and emotional recovery/healing processes of victims and perpetrators that participated in the hearings.
- Helped to ensure the safety and successes of the hearing by psychologically and emotionally preparing victims, perpetrators, PH Committee members and others to participate in the hearing.
- Identified the psychosocial and physical health needs of victims and perpetrators and made recommendations to inform future policy and programmatic interventions

C. METHODOLOGIES

LAPS worked closely with the Peace Building, Reconciliation and Social Cohesion project (PBRSCP) under the INCHR during the course of the implementation processes of the consultancy.

a) Desk Review and consultations

LAPS conducted desk reviews of existing documents and the ethnographic forum report of 2015. Besides, LAPS also held series of consultations and gathered relevant information with the INCHR and the UNDP which contributed towards the finalization of the plans that further inform the consultancy implementation strategies.

b) Consultancy Team

LAPS committed 5 psychosocial counselors and a team leader as field staffs to the consultancy. The 5 psychosocial counselors were all based in Rivercess County during the entire life span of the consultancy. Prior to the inception of the consultancy, the 5 Psychosocial Counselors (2 males, 3 females) were recruited and a one day orientation training workshop conducted with them along with their team leader in Yarpa Town, Rivercess County. During the training, the field staffs were introduced to the services of the consultancy and its related goals and objectives. Moreover, the staffs were educated on the service provision processes, the targeted beneficiaries and locations, the main collaborating stakeholders and, the use of the consultancy tools including, various data collection and tracking forms.

The field activities were led by the Team Leader/Supervisor who supervised and coordinated the field activities with all relevant stakeholders in Rivercess County including representatives of the INCHR.

c) Consultancy Start up and Implementation Processes

Upon the signing of the contract with the UNDP, a mobile team made up of senior and junior level staffs of LAPS traveled and spend about 5 days at the project locations within in Rivercess County during which time, all consultancy start up related tasks were finalized and carried out. Specifically, the team developed tools, recruited and orientated the consultancy staffs about the services of the consultancy and related objectives and objectives.

Moreover, the team visited 3 of the 4 consultancy implementation sites of Sahyah Town, Garpue's Town and Neezuin all situated within the district of Central "C" Rivercess county.



LAPS-INCHR Collaboration



LAPS-INCHR field Consultations



LAPS team sensitizing community members about the palava hut hearing exercise



LAPS conducts training on vicarious trauma to INCHR staffs and members of hearing committee

During the visits, the LAPS team got introduced to and, held acquaintance meetings with the community based note takers in collaboration with the INCHR's field team. The LAPS team was also made aware of the Palava Hut hearing committee. The committee membership was made up of prominent community members and local authorities charged with jury related roles/responsibilities of presiding over the hearing processes, listening to the stories of both the victims and respondents, ask questions, express opinions and, initiate peace and reconciliation resolutions between them.

Besides, LAPS collaborated with the INCHR in sensitizing the community about the Palava Hut Hearings processes and related objectives prior to the commencement of the exercise.

Moreover, LAPS conducted one internal psychosocial workshop on vicarious trauma for some staffers of the INCHR and Palava Hut committee members aimed at promoting the mental health and psychosocial well-being of the participants.

About 14 staffers(4 males and 10 females) of the INCHR and 9 community members (6 males and 3 females) participated in the 3 hours training that was facilitated by the Executive Director of LAPS Mr. Seidu Swaray in Neezuin Town on July 13, 2021. During the training, participants learned the definition of vicarious trauma, its short and long term effects and, the skills and techniques of how to manage and cope with it.

At the end of the training, participants expressed that, the knowledge and skills gained during the training will be used to regularly prevent and manage the effects of vicarious trauma on their lives after regular exposure to the art of listening to war stories from the victims and perpetrators during the course of the entire palava hut hearing processes.

And, about 50% of the targeted beneficiaries of the consultancy (victims and perpetrators/respondents) were offered psychosocial support services that helped to psychologically and emotionally prepare targeted beneficiaries to meet face-to-face to tell their stories and extend apologies and pardons for reconciliation before the kickoff of the palava hut hearing exercises.

And, the targeted beneficiaries also received education about the relevance, processes and safety of the Palava Hut hearing exercises.

c) SERVICES DURING AND AFTER THE PALAVA HUT HEARING EXERCISE

Overall, the psychosocial services were provided before, during and after the hearings to each of the targeted beneficiaries of the consultancy. The services were designed in ways that helped victims and perpetrators (consultancy beneficiaries/clients) manage and cope with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced as a result of the war.



Victims and Respondents prepared and engaged prior to appearing for the palava hut hearings



LAPS supporting targeted beneficiaries during palava hut hearings and reconciliation moments

Before the palava hut hearing processes, LAPS psychosocial counselors offered one-on-one counseling services to about 45 victims. These initial services helped to promote more understanding and reduce victims' fears and anxieties about the palava hut appearance. At one point, one of the female victims said *"I really like the separate meeting with us, because I was totally confused and never knew what was going to be the result of this whole thing. Some of my friends have been telling me that if I appear in the palava hut hearing, I will be one of those that will cause people to go the war crime court, which actually discouraged me before now. So, thank you people so much for clarifying all these critical issues to us. With this in mind, I will appear to tell my perpetrator about his wrong doing to me so that we can resolve the issues."*

During this process, project beneficiaries were separated and seated in different locations. The victims and perpetrators/respondents were kept in separate rooms with different psychosocial counselors assigned and offering them further psychological empowerment to be able to tell their stories during their appearance. Interestingly, all of the victims knew their perpetrators/respondents, but the perpetrators/respondents did not know their victims.

During the hearing, 2 psychosocial counselors (1 with victim and the other with the respondent) escorted and were available in the hall along with each of the beneficiaries during which time, they responded and supported them during the course of telling their stories as and when the need arises. In response to times when the victims and perpetrators were having arguments, the respective psychosocial counselors intervened and calmed them down. In response to situations in which anger and aggression rises between victims and respondents, the psychosocial counselors asked the Palava Hut committee members to talk with their beneficiaries outside the

hall. These interventions paid out well with very good outcomes.

In fact, one of the female victims during a heated argument between she and her perpetrator said *"Thank God that the counselor have talked to me , but the way I was vex, I could just leave the hall now."*

Altogether, during the palava hut hearing, the total beneficiaries that were identified during the entire process was 79 (58 males and 21 females). There were 49 cases and 48 of these cases were resolved with one case dismissed. This means that 45 victims and 34 perpetrators/respondents fully participated in the hearing process. About six (6) victims could not participate because their perpetrators/respondents did not appear for the hearing. Besides, the lowest was of 1 perpetrator/respondent to 1 victim, and highest of 1

perpetrator/respondent to 8 victims and 1 victim to 2 perpetrator/respondents.

After the hearing exercise, each of the targeted beneficiaries were offered one-on-one psychosocial counseling services during which time, they were firstly debriefed and grounded and then, prepared for departure to their respective communities. On an average, many of the project beneficiaries both (Victims and Perpetrators/respondents) expressed that though it was somehow challenging from the beginning, but with the emotional support that were offered by the psychosocial counselors before and during the palava hut hearing process, they felt good for participating and are now feeling happy of the peace that have been established among them. One perpetrator said *“I tried several times to apologize to some of the people that I hurt during the war, but I could not do so due to fears and guilt. I am really happy for this palava hut hearing program, which has provided the opportunity for me to come face to face and have reconciled with my victims today—I am relieved!”*

And because, the triggering of post-traumatic stress symptoms can sometimes be immediate or delayed based on several factors, all of the targeted beneficiaries were provided with a psychosocial support services’ contact information card that promoted easy access to psychosocial services and also provided further normalization and psychoeducation benefits long after the

consultancy has ended.

Those with special needs were further documented and disaggregated by sex and age for follow up services including, referrals to other partners offering services that are beyond the scope of this consultancy and for recommendations to relevant stakeholders as means of informing future policy and programmatic interventions.

Besides, LAPS provided 3 post group counselling sessions to secondary victims including, family members from the 3 targeted communities located in Central “C” District, Rivercess County. These sessions were designed with a facilitation guide which offered opportunities for community members or adversaries to come together to address issues, reconcile differences, and gain understanding and mutual trust by working toward common goals at both individual and community levels in accordance with the principles of the Palava Hut hearing initiatives.

In Sahyah Town, one of the female victims said *” I have clearly understood the value of this palava hut hearing program. I and my family will never attack our perpetrator anymore. We will ever remaind as good neighorb and family members.”*



LAPS conducts Post Hearing counseling sessions at targeted communities

D. PARTNERSHIPS

There existed cordial collaboration relationships between the INCHR and LAPS during the course of the entire consultancy. LAPS participated along with the INCHR in the official launching program of the palava hut hearing exercise in Neezuin Town on July 13, 2021. Besides, LAPS and the INCHR field staffs worked to mobilize and organize the project beneficiaries in the four project communities through the note takers that were trained by INCHR in the past. Moreover, the INCHR also formally introduced LAPS to the local authorities and community members in all of the four targeted communities.

Besides, collaboration relationships were built with the Carter Center trained Mental Health Clinicians assigned at the government run health center in Rivercess for the purposes of referring mental health related cases that may arise and found beyond the scope of the services of this consultancy. Potential category of cases that were to be referred include for instance, when a beneficiary of the consultancy is manifesting symptoms of hallucination or delusion whose treatment effort will require high level expertise including, the provision of pharmacological support services. Meanwhile, no case of this nature was encountered during the implementation course of this consultancy.

E. RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The consultancy took every step in accordance with the ethical principles of psychosocial counseling interventions to ensure that, the targeted beneficiaries were safe (psychologically and physically) while accessing our services and participating in the palava hut hearing exercise. Meanwhile, teamwork and consolidated effort of all relevant stakeholders including state security will be crucial in responding to external risks. Besides, effort were also made to ensure that, COVID 19 preventive measures were considered and practiced by LAPS staffs and the targeted beneficiaries from the onset and throughout the course of the consultancy implementation processes.

F. CONSULTANCY EXIT STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The consultancy did not only offered services to the targeted beneficiaries in order for them to fully participate in the palava hut hearing exercises without emotional breakdown, but also taught them some coping techniques, stress management and effective self-care practices. These gained knowledge and skills will forever stay with the beneficiaries long after the end of the consultancy.

Moreover, the psychosocial support contact information cards were presented to each of the targeted beneficiaries as an exit and sustainability tool.

G. Challenges and Related Interventions



Deplorable Road conditions

Deplorable road conditions and the constant down pour of rains were some of the major challenges faced during the implementation processes of the consultancy. Even though, we had a rented vehicle, its movement became risky due to the road conditions. On many occasions, our vehicle either got stocked in the mud making us spent more time on the road or, the vehicle cannot go further because another vehicle is stocked ahead of our vehicle on the path leading to our destinations. In response to this challenge, we used both motorbikes and a vehicle as the need arises appropriately as possible.

Another challenge was the coincidence of implementing the consultancy at a time when advocacy effort for the establishment of a war crime's court in Liberia was "very loud" in the country. This exacerbated the confusion, misinterpretations or misunderstanding among the targeted beneficiaries. Some beneficiaries expressed that, they were thinking the palava hut hearing processes will serve as a gate way to the setting up of the war crime court in the country and so, were planning to boycott the whole palava hut hearing exercise. Moreover, some interpreted the palava hut process to be like reporting their own community members, which according to them will create more enmity in the community rather than settling peace. In response to this challenge, LAPS counselors in

collaboration with INHCR social workers/ counselors provided more clarity and assured all the beneficiaries that the palava hut hearing has nothing to do with war crime's court or creating more enmity, instead it would provide opportunity where each beneficiary, especially, the victims will be able to politely tell their difficult war stories directly to their offenders face – to face and both will reasoned together for positive settlement and reconciliation.

H. LESSONS LEARNED AND RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Some participants may take advantage of the palava hut hearing process to work towards achieving other personal agenda. For instance, one case was found of a victim falsely accusing his perpetrator/respondent. Therefore, it is important that, future projects of this nature take note and apply effort to properly and thoroughly do background checks to ascertain the veracity of stories narrated by victims. This

strategy will also require more training for the story takers and Palava Hut committee members.

- Some of the perpetrators/responders have been struggling with the burden of guilt and shame since the end of the war and so, have been yearning to extend apologies to those they wronged but, the existing atmosphere has not been favorable for them to initiate the process. The Palava Hut hearing exercise was a “God Sent” for them. Peace and Reconciliation related funders or donors need to prioritize support for service of this nature so that, the Palava hut hearing exercise can be extended in other counties to allow lesser war crime victims and perpetrators to tell their stories and harmonize their differences for peaceful co-existence and community development
- When targeted beneficiaries are fully informed and sensitized on the palava hut hearing processes, they can have fewer fears, reduced anxieties and more willing to participate in the reconciliation process. Therefore, adequate psychosocial support is crucial for the success of the palava hut hearing process.