Development and application of school clusters in Liberia, 2005

Three reports were compiled:
1. An initial assessment of the feasibility and utility of developing school clusters in Liberia, which was done in March 2005.
2. A more comprehensive report recommending procedures and guidelines for the development of clusters throughout Liberia, June/July 2005
3. A manual for distribution to education practitioners to guide the development of clusters in Margibi County as a test area to start cluster formation in Liberia, June/July 2005.

The three reports follow.

Report on consultancy work in Liberia for the IIEP, March 2005

John M Mendelsohn
RAISON (Research & Information Services of Namibia)

In terms of IIEP Contract No. 05.10.14 and its terms of reference, the visit and work reported here constituted a first planning mission to Liberia. I departed from Windhoek on Saturday the 5th of March on a series of flights that was planned to get me to Monrovia on Sunday evening of the 6th of March. However, my flight from Johannesburg to Zurich was delayed for several reasons, causing me to miss the onward connections to Monrovia. No alternative flights were available, and I thus remained in Zurich until the next available flight, which had me arrive in Monrovia during the evening of Wednesday the 9th of March. I then remained in Liberia until my departure - as originally scheduled - on Sunday the 13th of March, arriving back in Windhoek during the afternoon of the 15th of March.

Work programme and activities
Upon arrival in Monrovia, I had an immediate briefing discussion with Anton de Grauwe. From his earlier appraisal of conditions in Liberia's education sector, he indicated that the original plan for the project to concentrate on micro-planning and school mapping would not be feasible. The most important reasons for this was that a lack of counterpart staff and anticipated changes in the Ministry of Education as a result of the October elections would mean that the school mapping process would perhaps not be continued (see Anton de Grauwe's report from his October mission). As an alternative, we agreed that the possibility of developing school clusters be considered as a way of bringing isolated schools together on a collaborative basis. This would also add weight to the process of decentralization. During the remainder of the consultancy we therefore focused on four objectives:

1. To investigate whether school clusters would be a desirable development for the Liberian school system.
2. To assess the availability and utility of statistical information on schools collected through UNICEF's Rapid Assessment of Learning Spaces (RALS) programme.
3. To assess the availability of mapped information on schools collected by the UN Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC), and to see how these data could be linked to the RALS data at some future date. (The HIC data concentrate on the locations of schools and thus differ completely from the statistical or EMIS-type data collected by the UNICEF RALS on conditions in schools.)
4. To plan how school clusters could be created in several districts.

The approach to developing school clusters, as formulated by Anton de Grauwe and me and described in the attached appendix, could form the basis of a new and revised term of reference for this consultancy and contract. In pursuit of the four objectives, discussions were held with the following people: the Minister of Education (Dr D. Evelyn S. Kandakai), the Deputy Minister for Planning and Development (Mr Peter Ben), the staff

of the Humanitarian Information Centre (Ms Melanie Mason, Ms Shawn Boeser and Mr Archie Delaney), Mr Tom Shafer (UNICEF officer responsible for education), the Chief of EMIS in the Ministry of Education (Mr Suomo), the Director of Personnel in the Ministry (Mr Othello Hodge), the Director of Planning in the Ministry, and Dr Ahmed Ferej (Head of UNESCO office in Monrovia)

Results
Key findings and recommendations arising from these discussions and the consultancy are as follows:

1. There was general agreement that the development of school clusters was desirable and feasible (see Appendix, p. 4), and that this project should go ahead with their development in a number of districts. However, the exact number of districts still needs to be determined. In addition, the pilot districts should be located in different settings and counties, and in areas where the UNICEF school development project is operating. It is hoped that UNICEF would perhaps help develop cluster centres, these central schools then helping to provide resources to neighbouring schools. Information gathered during the clustering process would also help UNICEF determine priorities for school developments in each district.

2. Statistical or EMIS-type information from the RALS database will be made available to this project. This was confirmed by Mr Tom Shafer, who indicated that these data are being continuously updated and improved. Most importantly, a unique code identifier for each school will be added to the data. This is the code generated for every school by the HIC mapping project, and it is this code that would allow the RALS and HIC databases to be linked.

3. Mapped information assembled by HIC will also be made available to this project. Data for five counties (Bong, Bomi, Grand Cape Mount, Margibi and Montserrado) are now available. These data include contextual features on district and county borders, roads, rivers and villages. The data have been checked during workshops held in each county, and participants at each workshop were required to identify the locations and status of each school. (The exact definition of a school for these mapping purposes was not determined. However, the kinds of schools (in terms of governance and grades offered) will become clear once the mapped information is linked to information on the same schools contained within the RALS database.) All schools were then given a unique code, which is the code now being introduced to the RALS database. Some of this work is being done by a staff member of the Ministry's EMIS unit who has been seconded to work with the HIC office. HIC staff provided me with copies of their data for the five counties.

4. During the next and second phase of this consultancy, data from RALS and HIC will be obtained and linked to compile and print draft maps of all schools and contextual features for each district. The maps will be used to show the most important features of each school, for example: governance status (private or government; type of school, phase of schooling, numbers of teachers and pupils, and physical condition. Consultations during this phase should help establish in

2

what districts the clusters should be developed. Guidelines on the composition and functioning of the clusters also need to be prepared.

5. In the final and third stage of the consultancy, a series of workshops should be held in each district to formulate the proposed clusters. Relevant education staff and school principals should attend the workshops. The maps, statistical information on schools, and guidelines will then be used to propose the groups of schools to form clusters, and which schools will operate as cluster centres.

6. Although not part of this consultancy, consideration should be given to the use of the HIC/RALS data in determining priorities for school development in the form of new schools, or the expansion or refurbishment of existing schools. The HIC database contains an estimate of the number of households in each village, and these figures can be used to generate an estimate of population density and – by implication – the density of children. An example map is attached to this report, and it shows rather clearly places where there are relatively high densities of people and an absence of schools. The utility of such a map would obviously be improved by adding information about existing schools, for example their condition, capacity and the grades offered. This information was not available to me for purposes of generating this example, but it should be available from the RALS database. This aspect is likely to be of interest and value to the UNICEF programme of school development in Liberia. Note, that the attached map is provided simply as an example of what could be achieved. I cannot confirm how accurate or comprehensive the data might be.

John M Mendelsohn
RAISON, PO Box 1405
Windhoek, Namibia

e-mail: john@raison.com.na
Telephone: +264-61-254962
Fax: +264-61-253361

31 March 2005

APPENDIX: SETTING UP SCHOOL CLUSTERS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR
IMPROVED PLANNING AND SUPERVISION IN LIBERIA

Background

Improving the quality of schools is a major policy objective of the present government of Liberia. The Ministry of Education, the County Education Officers (CEOs) and the District Education Officers (DEOs) all have a key role to play in this regard. Unfortunately, for a series of reasons, it is very difficult for these actors to reach out to all schools and to offer the support and supervision they need. In such a context, grouping neighbouring schools into clusters can be of great help, in at least three ways:
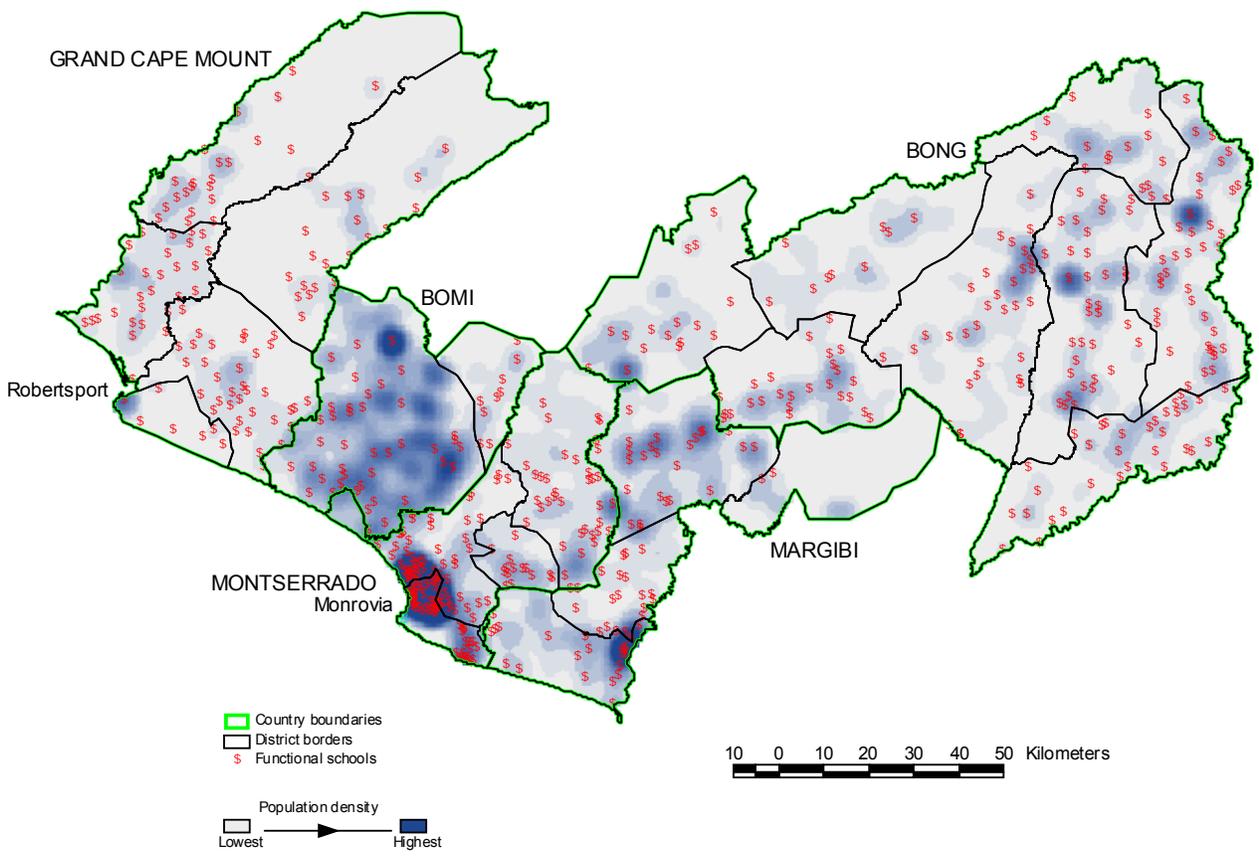
1. it helps to engender collaboration between schools and teachers and allows them to discuss the challenges they experience, possible solutions and best practices;
2. it facilitates management, communication and contact between the DEO and the schools;
3. it provides a framework for micro-planning in allowing for local-level assessments of schooling needs.

In appears that in some districts, schools and DEOs have initiated such a cluster school system by grouping schools and assigning within each cluster mentor teachers and principals to serve as supervising principals.

Objectives

This project proposes to build upon these initiatives and to work out the characteristics of what could be a national school cluster system, through a pilot covering several districts. Its particular objectives are to:

1. assemble all existing geographical, statistical and contextual information on schools in Liberia into one GIS database;
2. use this information to compile and print maps of schools in each education district. The maps will present basic information on the location and the characteristics of schools;
3. propose a series of criteria which could be of use in setting up clusters; discuss with district staff and with concerned stakeholders how to cluster schools in specific districts and how these clusters can help in improving the system's effectiveness and quality. Important criteria would be geographical proximity, numbers of schools in each cluster, linkages in terms of curriculum and phases, accessibility by road and political feasibility of collaboration within a given cluster.
4. develop a series of guidelines which can be used throughout the country for the formulation of clusters;
5. develop procedures to guide the functioning of clusters.

GRAND CAPE MOUNT

BONG

BOMI

Robertsport

MARGIBI

MONTSERRADO
Monrovia

Country boundaries
District borders
$ Functional schools

Population density
Lowest   Highest

10 0 10 20 30 40 50 Kilometers

Report on consultancy work in Liberia for the IIEP, June-July 2005

John M Mendelsohn
RAISON (Research & Information Services of Namibia

Background and purpose of consultancy
In terms of IIEP Contract No. 05.10.14 and its associated terms of reference, the visit and work reported here constituted a second mission to Liberia. I departed from Windhoek on Tuesday the 14th of June and arrived at 18h00 on Wednesday the 15th of June. I left from Monrovia during the evening of Wednesday the 6th of July, and then travelled to IIEP in Paris to present a briefing report and discussion on Friday the 8th of July, before returning to Windhoek.

Work during this three-week period followed an earlier visit to Liberia in March 2005 when it was decided to explore and test the development of school clusters as a support system for schooling. The major aims during this three-week visit were to:
- assemble existing geographical, statistical and contextual information on schools in Liberia;
- use this information to compile and print maps for selected districts to show the locations of schools, information about those schools, and contextual information on infrastructure (service centres, roads etc) and other geographical features that might affect clustering.
- propose a series of criteria which could be of use in setting up clusters; discuss with district staff and with concerned stakeholders how to cluster schools in specific districts and how these clusters can help in improving the system's effectiveness and quality;
- develop a series of guidelines which can be used throughout the country for the formulation of clusters;
- develop procedures to guide the functioning of clusters.

Clusters are essentially frameworks that can offer support to improve the quality of teaching, management of schools and community participation in schools. These frameworks are likely to provide the greatest benefits where:
- Schools are geographically isolated and thus receive little support, management and supervision from external influences. In Liberia, distances may not always be great, but many schools are indeed hard to reach because of poor roads.
- The supervision of education is weak because county and district education officers often have other priorities, again leaving schools isolated in terms of support and management. It is clear that most schools in Liberia operate with minimal support from outside.
- Schools are small, with the result that most teachers in any single school are the only ones teaching their subject. Thus, they have little chance of comparing or sharing or learning from other people teaching the same subject. Most Liberian schools are indeed small. For example, 70% of all schools have fewer than 10 teachers.

Activities during mission period

The first part of the work went much quicker than anticipated, namely obtaining the mapping (GIS) and educational statistics data. The UN's Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC) had assembled the GIS information from a variety of sources, and locally knowledgeable people had checked much of the data during district workshops. This included information on the names and locations of schools. Education information was mainly based on the 2003 and 2004 Rapid Assessment of Learning Spaces (RALS) survey conducted by UNICEF, which was then partially updated with information collected during the district mapping workshops. A unique code was given to each mapped village and the same code was used in the RALS dataset for schools reported as being located in that village. The mapped village locations and education data could thus be linked easily.

Early in the mission, Dr Ahmed Ferej (UNESCO Chief in Monrovia) and I decided that it would be most effective to introduce clusters on a trial basis in one county. The county chosen – Margibi – was selected because it is relatively close to Monrovia, has a mix of urban and rural and public and non-government schools, and the County Education Officer for Margibi would offer good support to the trial. The rationale for selecting a pilot area was that if the system worked in one region, demand would lead the system to spread further. Such demand would be a key requirement for any kind of long-term development in Liberia. A pilot programme of implementation would also provide valuable lessons to help the further development of clusters elsewhere.

Over several days, I then compiled and printed maps showing the locations of all schools, roads, rivers, villages and towns in each of Margibi's districts: Gibi, Kakata, Firestone and Mambah-Kaba. The boundaries of these four districts were obtained from HIC, but during subsequent meetings with District Education Officers it transpired that the county is divided into three districts for purposes of education: Gibi, Kakata and Harbel. The boundaries of these districts are quite different from those recorded by HIC. During these meetings it also became clear that many schools had been mapped wrongly. Thus, the maps I had been produced on the basis of the HIC and RALS data showed some schools that were in different counties, and also excluded many schools that were indeed present in the Margibi districts. I was unable to ascertain how these major errors had arisen, but it was also clear that little could be done to correct them within the scope and available time of this mission. I suspect that the linking codes had often been applied incorrectly.

As a reflection of how poor and little information is available, the total number of schools in Margibi was variously reported as 166 (41 public and 115 private schools - by the County Education Officer's report for 2004), 213 schools in the RALS survey, and 236 schools in the HIC data. The Harbel District Education Officer told me that he had records for 65 schools but he knew of another 22 schools in this district.

Much of the remaining period in Monrovia was spent consulting people (listed in Appendix 1) and in compiling a booklet of guidelines on the introduction and functioning of clusters in Margibi (attached as Appendix 2). The County Education Officer of Margibi was out of Liberia during my visit and it was therefore not possible to consult

him and get his agreement to the cluster trials in his county. However, Dr Ferej will discuss these aspects with him. Two visits were paid to Kakata, where I had discussions with staff at several schools and the District Education Officer and her deputy. I also visited Harbel District, again meeting with staff in a number of schools and the District Education Officer. Other consultations were held with staff of the Ministry of Education and various development agencies and NGOs.

Potentials and constraints
Liberia is not an easy country. The thousands of shells of buildings, big and small, older and newer, show how the country has been through repeated cycles of development, destruction and decay. Each building is a monument to optimism, investment and aspiration; each shell testimony to failure to make progress. The clusters we propose here are likewise based on a hope of development. Is such development tenable? What are the fundamental constraints and potentials, and what are the chances of success or failure? Most of my discussions were used to gain answers to these questions, more specifically on whether the clusters would be useful, how they could be implemented, what constraints they would face, and what kinds of support would be needed for their successful implementation. In addition, I spent a good deal of time trying to appraise conditions in schools, in the Ministry of Education, and in society in general to gauge how clusters might work in the light of these difficult underlying circumstances.

The proposed draft booklet or manual (Appendix 2) provides information on the potential uses and benefits of the cluster system. As mentioned above, many of the conditions in Liberia suggest that clusters would be useful frameworks to improve and support schooling. But there are obviously costs to the cluster system, notably opportunity and travel costs for all concerned. Cluster centre principals would also have additional responsibilities and workloads. To be successful, therefore, clusters would have to offer incentives strong enough to outweigh the costs. Since it is highly unlikely that there would ever be financial rewards, we have to consider whether the benefits of clustering themselves could offer adequate incentives. Broadly speaking, we can think of the rewards ranging between more altruistic ones and those that are self-centered. The most philanthropic incentives are the overall improvement of learning, school management, and parental participation. More directly, and selfishly, teachers and principals stand to gain by their jobs becoming more effective, satisfying and easier. Cluster centre principals and other people that take on leadership roles (as committee chairmen, for example) in the clusters would gain significant status in their local and education communities.

The process of clustering could build on some collaborative activities that already occur. The most important of these are run by the Catholic schools which have a well-established system of meetings that is organized and controlled by the Catholic Education Secretary. Principals meet at least once a semester to discuss a variety of matters at their schools, while teachers meet to standardize promotion requirements, amongst other things. In an unrelated example, groupings of representatives of parent-teacher associations were formed for a project promoted by the Catholic Relief Services. Many districts also have principals' associations, which are used to discuss and resolve such

issues as the need for students to carry documents proving their final grades, the circulation of promotional lists, and the setting of common test papers. Finally, some teachers in the Kakata District shift from school to school to deliver lessons. Arrangements for teachers to do this are made partially by the principals of different schools, although the teachers use these opportunities to earn additional incomes paid by the schools where they offer classes.

Most people I met were extremely optimistic and enthusiastic about the proposal to develop clusters, generally agreeing that the system would offer substantial benefits and that it could be implemented. While this optimism is in contrast to the some of the more negative views or constraints discussed below, I was also not sure whether some people's enthusiasm was partially a polite response to me as a foreign consultant from a development agency. And yet again, such enthusiasm may also reflect a real demand for better education, a demand made clear by the fact that over half of all schools in Liberia are private schools.

Introducing clusters will be relatively simple, but sustaining them may be much more difficult. Perhaps the greatest constraint stems from conditions under which teaching staff work, especially people employed by the Ministry of Education. Average salaries paid to teachers range between US$15 and US$20 per month. These abysmal salaries are also often not paid on time, with the result that teachers need to find other ways of surviving. These harsh realities will persist for the foreseeable future, and few people may find the time or spirit needed to engage in extramural cluster activities. The same will be probably true of principals, and supervisory officials in the district, county and head offices. All of this will probably hinder the goals of improvement and volunteerism required in clusters.

Several other possible constraints relate to poor working and other conditions in schools. The most active, competent teachers and principals, from whom leadership in cluster activities is expected, are likely to be more devoted to other business enterprises. These people are also unlikely to gain much from clusters, and most good teachers have left the teaching service anyway. Some people mentioned that folk living in more remote rural and inland areas are far more community minded than people living nearer the coast, who are more selfish in being preoccupied with their own welfare and enrichment. If this is true, the majority of clusters are unlikely to have much success since most schools are located in the more densely populated coastal regions.

There is a mix of non-government and public schools throughout Liberia. Non-government schools tend to have more resources and better paid teachers who are more committed than those in public schools. Although most people I consulted thought that non-government schools would be keen or happy to collaborate with public schools in the same clusters, there remains the possible threat that private schools and their teachers would be unlikely to perceive any value in clusters.

Some people expressed the view that the Ministry of Education would have to issue instructions to get the clusters implemented, and that strict regulations would be needed to keep them functioning. This would contradict the spirit of sharing and self-

improvement embodied in clustering. It is also hard to imagine how the Ministry of Education will enforce the functioning of clusters. It should be noted that it is extremely unlikely that the Ministry of Education could provide material or financial support or incentives to clusters.

Recommendations and next steps
At the end of all of this, I remain unable to provide a clear recommendation on whether the cluster system should be introduced formally or not. I think it is clear that it will be quite simple to introduce clusters, and some schools will probably make good use of cluster activities, at least in the beginning. However, the constraints that stem from societal and economic conditions are so severe that other priorities will probably remain the focus of most school staff. But, perhaps the system is worth a try, at least on a trial basis in Margibi. The following recommendations are now made:

1. Based on what I have reported and other considerations, UNESCO (Monrovia) and IIEP (Paris) must make a formal decision as to whether to go ahead with clusters in Margibi or not. If the decision is indeed made to go ahead, then the remaining recommendations should be considered.
2. Although the development process should primarily be from the "bottom up" rather than the other way around, it will be important to reconfirm the support of the Ministry head office in Monrovia and Margibi county office. UNESCO (Monrovia) should therefore inform and obtain support for the cluster process from the Margibi County Education Officer, the Assistant Ministers of Primary and Secondary Education, and the Minister of Education.
3. The great majority of development work should be in the schools, mainly with principals and the principals' association. Several copies of the brochure on cluster development in Margibi should be sent to each school, and all principals should be invited to one or more workshops to discuss the implementation of the cluster system. The workshops will also be used to formulate the composition of each cluster, thus deciding what schools will fall in each cluster and which school should be nominated as the cluster centre.
4. To achieve these steps, approximately 500 copies of the brochure (Appendix 2) should be printed as an attractive document. Perhaps the printing should be arranged by IIEP using by a good quality printer in Paris.
5. Consideration needs to be given to the timing of the workshops, and logistical arrangements will have to be made: find and book venues, send letters of invitation to all schools principals, etc. I would be happy to attend these workshops as a facilitator.
6. Implementation will be improved if one or two members of the UNESCO staff should act as longer-term resource people to visit schools and the district education offices, offering advice and encouragement to start and maintain the clustering process. While the UNESCO staff should attempt to visit all schools in the county, repeat visits to selected, more interested and committed cluster centre principals will be of great value. The staff should use these visits to encourage the cluster centre principals to get cluster activities going, and to offer any

appropriate support that they can provide. I believe that both Mr Francis Gray and Francis Massaquoi of the UNESCO office in Monrovia would be more than capable to undertake these tasks.

7. A programme to provide management, planning, financial administration, leadership and cluster activity training to cluster centre principals should also be implemented. An appropriate trainer would have to be recruited to offer a series of training courses.

8. Implementation will further be enhanced by the provision of some material support to the cluster centres. Each centre could be given a package of stationery (flip chart stand and sheets, felt pens, writing pens and pads etc) for use during cluster meetings. It would also be useful if a copying machine (roneo or risograph) could be provided to each cluster centre. The machine would be used by all the schools in the cluster to copy test and examination papers and any other materials of use and benefit to the cluster schools. Margibi may end up having something like 30 clusters if we assume that about 180 schools in the county are divided into clusters each consisting of an average of six schools.

9. All development partners should be informed about the cluster system and its trial implementation in Margibi, and their support and collaboration in the process should be sought. Whenever possible, development projects should use the clusters as a framework for their activities. There is particular scope for collaboration with UNICEF which has been contemplating the use of clusters for teacher training (see Appendix 3).

10. Finally, the support and participation of most important organizations running non-government schools (Firestone and the Catholic Education Secretariat) should be sought. It might be prudent to consider using the linkages that now exist between Catholic schools as a framework upon which clusters can be developed. For example, public and other non-Catholic schools might join the existing networks of Catholic schools.

Acknowledgments

John M Mendelsohn
RAISON, PO Box 1405
Windhoek, Namibia

e-mail: john@raison.com.na
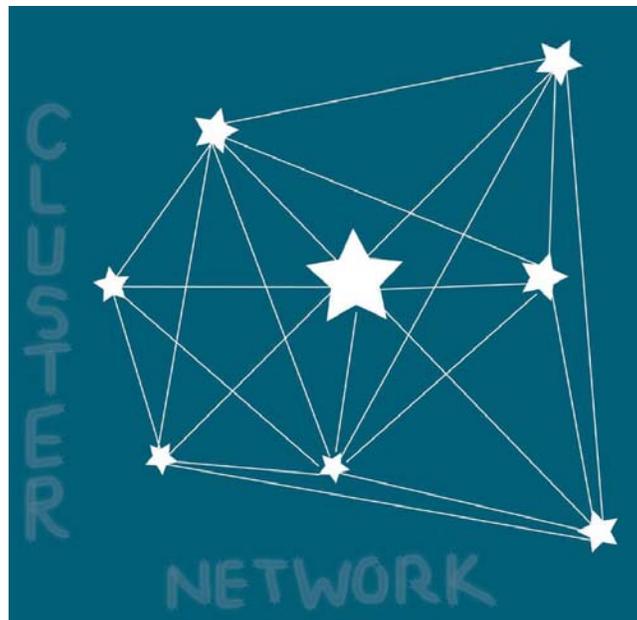Telephone: +264-61-254962
Fax: +264-61-253361

23 July 2005

Appendix 1: List of people and organizations consulted:

John Suomo (UNICEF)
Felix Edwards (Save the Children, UK)
Matthew Flomo (Director of Curriculum, Ministry of Education)
Christine Wollie (District Education Officer – Kakata)
Eddie O. Amara (Assistant District Education Officer - Kakata
David McKay (District Education Officer – Marshall)
Simon Taylor (Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC)
Archie Delaney (Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC)
Shawn Boeser (Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC)
Abdulai Jalloh (Humanitarian Information Centre (HIC)
Celeste Staley (Liberian Transition Initiative (LTI)
Moses Kwalulu (Liberian Transition Initiative (LTI)
Felix Edwards (Save the Children (UK))
Foday Town Public School, Giah Clan
All Saints Catholic School, Unification Town
George Washington Carver Academy Catholic School, Unification Town
Robertsfield Baptist Academy, Unification Town
KRTTI Demonstration School, Kakata
YMCA School, Kakata
Lango Lippaye High School, Kakata

The development and functioning of school clusters in Margibi County

A cluster is a **framework** that provides for the **local support** of schools in the cluster. A cluster is also a union, co-operative or community of schools. The grouping is achieved by clusters bringing principals, teachers and other stakeholders together to support each other. Clusters of schools are thus groups of schools in which people with the greatest interests in schools help each other for their mutual benefit. The benefits come from the variety of ways in which the framework can be used, as will be described in this document.

Each cluster consists of several schools located close to each other. One school in each group serves as the Cluster Centre to co-ordinate, manage and stimulate activities in the cluster. The Cluster Centre should be as central and accessible as possible to other schools in the cluster. The Centre should also provide overall leadership of activities in the cluster.

School clusters best serve to improve education in circumstances where schools are relatively inaccessible or small. Both conditions hold true for many schools in Liberia, with the result that most school staff work in complete isolation, seldom being able to benefit from the experience of other people. Teachers experience isolation because most of them are the only people in their schools that teach a specific subject or grade. For example, there is usually only one Mathematics or Geography teacher for certain grades in a school, and he or she cannot benefit from collaboration with other Mathematics or Geography teachers.

It has been recommended that school clusters be considered as part of the programme to improve education in Liberia. The Minister of Education has endorsed this, and the first steps are now being taken to introduce the system. The county of Margibi has been selected as a pilot area, and this document provides information on how clusters should be formulated and function in Margibi.

THE FUNCTIONS AND BENEFITS OF CLUSTERS

The framework provided by clusters brings people together in various collaborative groups to benefit from each other by sharing their experience, ideas, solutions, resources and energy. It is this sharing within the community that is at the heart of clusters. The best way to describe cluster activities is to examine the ways in which different groups of people can support each other.

Collaboration between teachers

1. Teachers can come together to discuss and interpret syllabuses, and to draw up common schemes of work. This encourages teachers to keep in step with other schools in the group. Their morale and confidence is boosted, and their skills are developed as they work together to improve their teaching efforts within this supportive context.
2. Test papers are set, typed, duplicated, assessed and moderated as a group effort. As a result, teachers do not set their own question papers, which saves them time. Better test papers are set, covering a broader range of questions.
3. Moderation between teachers helps to improve standards, and all students in the cluster are exposed to similar levels of testing.
4. Good teaching practices and resources are shared for the benefit of all.

Collaboration between principals

1. School principals learn from each other's experience in dealing with issues such as: fund raising, drawing up school time tables, disciplinary problems related to teachers or students, and the ordering materials and furniture.
2. Decisions made by a group of principals, acting with common purpose, have greater authority in dealing with issues that require firm action. The principals form a unified front, resulting in faster and more effective solutions that have greater ownership and local relevance.
3. Teacher and student absenteeism is reduced when more principals are involved in the joint management of schools.
4. The principals may jointly develop job descriptions for all teachers in their schools.
5. Less experienced principals can be guided by their colleagues.
6. Principals share ideas with the result that schools are managed more as networks rather than as individual empires. Constructive, competitive spirits develop between schools.
7. Improvements to schools, such as new facilities and the addition of new grades, can be planned jointly to benefit whole communities.

8. Ways of raising funds and community and parental involvement are planned, and decisions are made on the proper functioning of school boards and committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs).

Collaboration between parent groups
1. Cluster-based groups can be used to bring together parents and parent teacher associations (PTAs) so that the whole community is better informed about the activities of their children and schools.
2. Community groups that represent all the schools, teachers and students have much greater influence and authority in negotiating with the Ministry of Education, donors, businesses, politicians, and other people and organizations.
3. Community groups often mobilize parents, encouraging them to contribute more funds to their schools, to do voluntary work for the schools, and to take more interest in the education of their children, for example.
4. When parents begin to identify the community of schools, they better understand reasons for changes, for example in upgrading one school (rather than all schools) or moving teachers to schools where they are most needed.

Other benefits
1. School clusters help to decentralize the management of schooling and to enhance community or democratic involvement in education.
2. The community spirit encouraged by clusters helps build unity and trust between people.
3. Everyone gains a clearer understanding and better information on what is happening in schools. Transparency and peer review is promoted.
4. Scarce resources and good teachers may be shared between schools.
5. Better links with District Education Offices are developed. For example, there may 50 or more schools in a district and it is difficult for the DEO to visit or communicate with every school. Now, the DEO can communicate with Cluster Centres from where information is distributed to other schools. Likewise, other people and organizations can use the same more efficient channels to deliver their services.
6. Likewise, Cluster Centres can place stationery and textbook orders, rather than each school having to do this separately.
7. The collection of statistics is planned and coordinated through the Cluster Centre, again saving time and transport costs.
8. Teachers and other staff can be allocated more effectively if staffing needs are evaluated for the needs of a group of schools that serve the wider community.
9. Appointments and transfers of teachers can be recommended through a process of consensus.
10. The cluster system provides a framework through which in-service training for teachers and principals can be delivered efficiently at each Cluster Centre. Those that have been trained then pass on information, ideas and skills to their colleagues within clusters.
11. Clusters provide a framework for planning the provision of schooling in a wider and more logical context of the community.

12. Better planning within the community of schools will allow for certain schools to be upgraded to junior or senior secondary levels so that students progress through the grades by moving to nearby schools that now offer higher phases.
13. The cluster system can be used for the planning of donor programmes to direct assistance to areas where it is most needed. This may reduce the duplication of resources and services.
14. Other components of Liberia's education programme (for example Early Childhood Care, and Adult and Non-formal Education) can benefit by linking their activities to clusters.

ROLES AND SELECTION OF CLUSTER CENTERS

One school is appointed as the Cluster Centre in each cluster. Where possible, the Cluster Center should have adequate facilities and be situated at a development centre where other social and commercial services are available. Cluster Centres should also set good examples for management and teaching practices. The principal of the Cluster Centre should be a strong and committed manager, with a vision that extends beyond his or her school to the needs of all schools and the community.

The Cluster Centres become the focal points for contact and co-ordination between schools. They serve as meeting places and in-service training centres, and every effort should therefore be made to support the Centres to perform these roles. Where possible, meetings should be arranged during school hours. Additional staff may be provided to assist at Cluster Centres. Competent and committed principals should be appointed at the Cluster Centres and steps should be taken to replace principals who cannot take on the additional roles expected at Cluster Centres.

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3. organise the functioning of the cluster management committees,
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5. distribute, discuss and collect statistical questionnaires, promote the efficient and equitable allocation of teachers, advise schools on how class groups should be arranged so that teachers and classrooms are used effectively,
6. pass on advice and training that they receive to all principals in the cluster, and
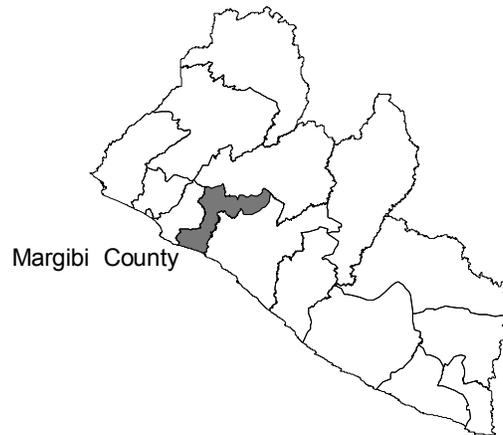7. promote community and parental participation.

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Clusters provide the overall framework for collaboration between communities of schools, but several formal structures should be developed within the clusters to bring people together regularly and to help organize their activities. Perhaps the most important of these are teacher or subject committees and the committee of school principals.

Committees of teachers should ideally be organized around different subjects, for example as a Committee of Mathematics Teachers, or a Committee of Grade 1 Teachers. Each such committee should be coordinated by a facilitator or chairperson.
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requirement is that schools should be able to meet regularly and easily. Private and public schools will be grouped in the same clusters, since both can learn from each other.

BUILDING AWARENESS

The cluster system needs to be clearly presented and explained to build awareness and a clear understanding of its requirements, processes and potentials. This can be done through information campaigns, workshops and media releases. People working in the education system - teaching staff, County and District Education Office staff - are the most important target audience, but information should also be provided to school boards and local leaders.

Clusters work best when responsibilities are delegated to them. County and District Education Officers have to be bold to relinquish some of their authority to the clusters. They should also provide clear directives on how the clusters should function. It is essential to give consistent support to the cluster management about their responsibilities, encouraging them to use the cluster system to improve the management and provision of schooling.

There are several reasons for testing the cluster system in Margibi before perhaps introducing clusters to other schools in the country. First, the trials will show what cluster activities deliver the greatest benefits for Liberian schools. Second, improved ways of developing and introducing clusters will become apparent. Third, lessons will be learnt on what kinds of support are needed to sustain clusters. The testing of clusters in Margibi will therefore provide important lessons for the benefit of all Liberians. Finally, if the clusters are successful in Margibi, other counties will want to introduce the system.

Appendix 3: Undated project proposal supplied by UNICEF (Monrovia)

<u>Project Description</u>

<u>Background:</u>

Increasing the quality of education remains a significant challenge in Liberia. Access is being remedied by several projects that are renovating schools in the country (Peace Winds Japan-Lofa, UNOPS/UNICEF Nimba, GAA Grand Gedeh)

UNICEF is supporting the MOE to train teachers at the primary school level. However the monitoring, evaluation, and refresher training needs for these, and other qualitative interventions, is lacking.

The Education Officers of each district and county have, in addition to their other administrative responsibilities, primary responsibility for supervision of principals and schools. This is severely constrained by many factors, including many other responsibilities of the E.O., poor morale, and large geographic areas making frequent visits unrealistic.

<u>Concept:</u>

The "cluster" approach to monitoring schools is a realistic approach to the monitoring and refresher training of small numbers of teachers. A supervising or "head" teacher would be chosen to receive specialized skill in monitoring teachers. This supervising teacher can also perform many other functions, such as EFA monitoring, serving as a Trainer to train teachers in the cluster, and as a resource for teachers with books and specialized learning materials as well as educational expertise.

<u>Methodology:</u>

UNICEF and UNESCO will partner to pilot this program in 1 county that implements many ALP projects (i.e. Lofa, Nimba, Maryland). ALP would be one component of the supervision tasks.

UNICEF will choose clusters of 4-6 schools for project implementation. One teacher, with appropriate qualifications (at least C level training with affirmative selection of women) will receive one month of specialized training from UNESCO chosen educational experts, as well as principles and measuring of EFA goals in communities. Supervisorial styles, techniques, and strategies will be taught. Peer training opportunities will be created.

<u>Output:</u>

5 supervising teachers will be supervising 20-25 public or community schools geographically clustered to enable one visit/week. Teachers will gather EFA information,

gather data as proscribed, and provide special training focusing on student centered classroom teaching, improved repertoire of teaching skills, and monthly record keeping to track attendance and other figures. Supervising teachers will also be available to receive training that can be passed on to classroom teachers, such as Lifeskills, HIV/AIDS, and additional subjects as time progresses.

Estimated Costs:

Training of 5 teachers	$5,000
Transportation for one year	5,000
Data sheets, etc	5,000
Five motorcycles	10,000
Logistical support	10,000
	_____
	$35,000

Appendix 4: A few general comments and ideas on education in Liberia that might be of interest to anyone.

Three things are clear about the Liberian education system. First, most aspects of it are chaotic, and it fares extremely poorly on all measures and assessments. This is particularly true of public schooling, a notional service perhaps most acutely and fundamentally flawed in paying teachers less than US$1 per day. Moreover, the token salaries are often only paid after months of delay (subsidies of US$2/day for each cow in some European countries are at least paid on time). There are other fundamental flaws. What is even more regrettable than the chaos, however, is the reluctance to acknowledge the extent of the problem. Most people appear to be in denial, somehow pretending that government schooling can really be improved with a little tinkering here and there. This unfortunate view stems from an assumption that schooling is largely a public service (cynically, education is too important to be the responsibility of governments, and nowhere would this be truer than in Liberia).

On the other hand, and as a second point, there appears to be rather vibrant and effective system of non-government schooling. Communities, churches, companies and private individuals own and run more than half of all schools. Few of these are elitist schools and most effective schooling in Liberia is probably provided by these non-government organizations. However, many people dismiss these private efforts, perhaps fearing that they are selective and only cater for children from wealthier homes. Our blind faith in public service has to be re-examined if government is unable to provide public schooling.
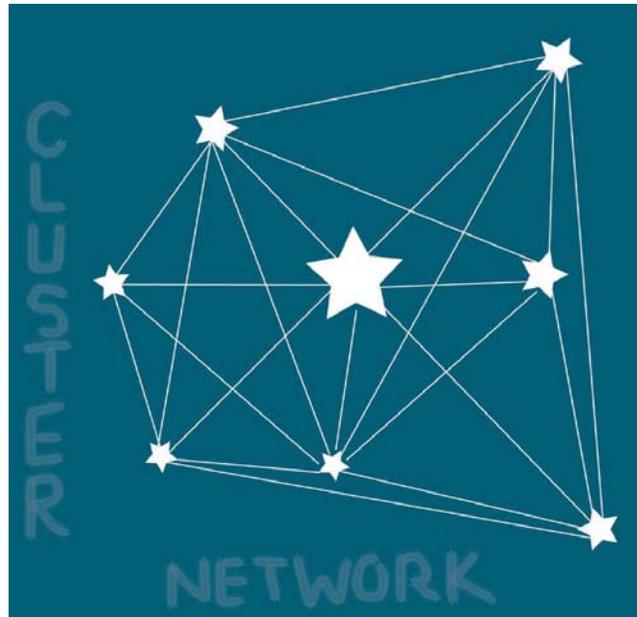
Third, much of the education system is based on the premise that children should be educated to serve a formal economy, one offering reasonable prospects of obtaining employment. However, informal economic activity is very much more vibrant in Liberia (and indeed most other African countries) than more structured enterprises, and education systems should perhaps do more to prepare children accordingly. Thus, for example, how much schooling prepares children to get jobs in contrast to being self-employed?

Two activities occurred to me to be particularly necessary in Liberia.
1. A project to map and audit all schools would considerably improve the quality of information on Liberia's education system. Mapped locations recorded using GPS recorders would be useful for many purposes of planning etc, and the requirement to actually visit every school to record its co-ordinates would make it much harder to record false information. Basic statistics would be recorded at each school to produce a reliable compilation of information on schooling.

2. A detailed study of non-government schooling is needed to see how that sector can be supported and developed. For the time being, most development agencies focus attention on ineffective and diminishing public services, ignoring the fact that private sector enterprises are flourishing. The degradation of public service and burgeoning of private economic activity is true throughout Africa. We should acknowledge this reality as it applies to the education sector, and see how we can support growing, dynamic sectors of society.

The development and functioning of
school clusters
in Margibi County

A cluster is a **framework** that provides for the **local support** of schools in the cluster. A cluster is also a union, co-operative or community of schools. The grouping is achieved by clusters bringing principals, teachers and other stakeholders together to support each other. Clusters of schools are thus groups of schools in which people with the greatest interests in schools help each other for their mutual benefit. The benefits come from the variety of ways in which the framework can be used, as will be described in this document.

Each cluster consists of several schools located close to each other. One school in each group serves as the Cluster Centre to co-ordinate, manage and stimulate activities in the cluster. The Cluster Centre should be as central and accessible as possible to other schools in the cluster. The Centre should also provide overall leadership of activities in the cluster.

School clusters best serve to improve education in circumstances where schools are relatively inaccessible or small. Both conditions hold true for many schools in Liberia, with the result that most school staff work in complete isolation, seldom being able to benefit from the experience of other people. Teachers experience isolation because most of them are the only people in their schools that teach a specific subject or grade. For example, there is usually only one Mathematics or Geography teacher for certain grades in a school, and he or she cannot benefit from collaboration with other Mathematics or Geography teachers.

It has been recommended that school clusters be considered as part of the programme to improve education in Liberia. The Minister of Education has endorsed this, and the first steps are now being taken to introduce the system. The county of Margibi has been selected as a pilot area, and this document provides information on how clusters should be formulated and function in Margibi.

THE FUNCTIONS AND BENEFITS OF CLUSTERS

The framework provided by clusters brings people together in various collaborative groups to benefit from each other by sharing their experience, ideas, solutions, resources and energy. It is this sharing within the community that is at the heart of clusters. The best way to describe cluster activities is to examine the ways in which different groups of people can support each other.

Collaboration between teachers

1. Teachers can come together to discuss and interpret syllabuses, and to draw up common schemes of work. This encourages teachers to keep in step with other schools in the group. Their morale and confidence is boosted, and their skills are developed as they work together to improve their teaching efforts within this supportive context.
2. Test papers are set, typed, duplicated, assessed and moderated as a group effort. As a result, teachers do not set their own question papers, which saves them time. Better test papers are set, covering a broader range of questions.
3. Moderation between teachers helps to improve standards, and all students in the cluster are exposed to similar levels of testing.
4. Good teaching practices and resources are shared for the benefit of all.

Collaboration between principals

1. School principals learn from each other's experience in dealing with issues such as: fund raising, drawing up school time tables, disciplinary problems related to teachers or students, and the ordering materials and furniture.
2. Decisions made by a group of principals, acting with common purpose, have greater authority in dealing with issues that require firm action. The principals form a unified front, resulting in faster and more effective solutions that have greater ownership and local relevance.
3. Teacher and student absenteeism is reduced when more principals are involved in the joint management of schools.
4. The principals may jointly develop job descriptions for all teachers in their schools.
5. Less experienced principals can be guided by their colleagues.
6. Principals share ideas with the result that schools are managed more as networks rather than as individual empires. Constructive, competitive spirits develop between schools.
7. Improvements to schools, such as new facilities and the addition of new grades, can be planned jointly to benefit whole communities.

8. Ways of raising funds and community and parental involvement are planned, and decisions are made on the proper functioning of school boards and committees and parent-teacher associations (PTAs).

Collaboration between parent groups
1. Cluster-based groups can be used to bring together parents and parent teacher associations (PTAs) so that the whole community is better informed about the activities of their children and schools.
2. Community groups that represent all the schools, teachers and students have much greater influence and authority in negotiating with the Ministry of Education, donors, businesses, politicians, and other people and organizations.
3. Community groups often mobilize parents, encouraging them to contribute more funds to their schools, to do voluntary work for the schools, and to take more interest in the education of their children, for example.
4. When parents begin to identify the community of schools, they better understand reasons for changes, for example in upgrading one school (rather than all schools) or moving teachers to schools where they are most needed.

Other benefits
1. School clusters help to decentralize the management of schooling and to enhance community or democratic involvement in education.
2. The community spirit encouraged by clusters helps build unity and trust between people.
3. Everyone gains a clearer understanding and better information on what is happening in schools. Transparency and peer review is promoted.
4. Scarce resources and good teachers may be shared between schools.
5. Better links with District Education Offices are developed. For example, there may 50 or more schools in a district and it is difficult for the DEO to visit or communicate with every school. Now, the DEO can communicate with Cluster Centres from where information is distributed to other schools. Likewise, other people and organizations can use the same more efficient channels to deliver their services.
6. Likewise, Cluster Centres can place stationery and textbook orders, rather than each school having to do this separately.
7. The collection of statistics is planned and coordinated through the Cluster Centre, again saving time and transport costs.
8. Teachers and other staff can be allocated more effectively if staffing needs are evaluated for the needs of a group of schools that serve the wider community.
9. Appointments and transfers of teachers can be recommended through a process of consensus.
10. The cluster system provides a framework through which in-service training for teachers and principals can be delivered efficiently at each Cluster Centre. Those that have been trained then pass on information, ideas and skills to their colleagues within clusters.
11. Clusters provide a framework for planning the provision of schooling in a wider and more logical context of the community.

12. Better planning within the community of schools will allow for certain schools to be upgraded to junior or senior secondary levels so that students progress through the grades by moving to nearby schools that now offer higher phases.
13. The cluster system can be used for the planning of donor programmes to direct assistance to areas where it is most needed. This may reduce the duplication of resources and services.
14. Other components of Liberia's education programme (for example Early Childhood Care, and Adult and Non-formal Education) can benefit by linking their activities to clusters.

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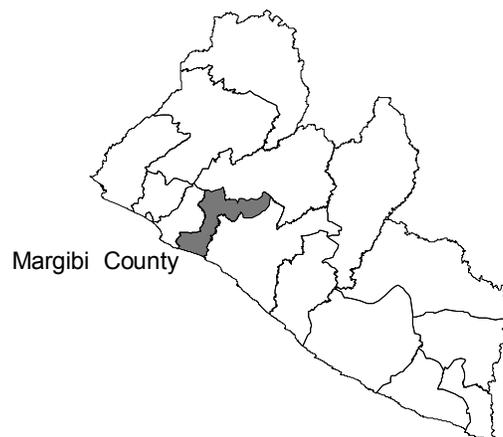7. promote community and parental participation.

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