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SUCCESS STORY

Liberian Children Enhance Their Identity through Song

Multiethnic children's choirs showcase the diversity of Liberia's culture



USAID/OTI/LIBERIA

The Central Monrovia Children's Choir sings a song in the Bassa dialect at the Unification Day concert.

USAID/OTI's BRDG-Liberia program was initiated in September 2006 to support the political transition prompted by the free and fair election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female head of state in Africa.

The Building Recovery and Reform through Democratic Governance (BRDG) program assists the Government of Liberia and other key actors to further the following political objectives:

- *Improving capacity in such areas as planning, budgeting, communication, and coordination with relevant counterparts*
- *Mounting effective responses to high-visibility issues*
- *Strengthening the Mano River Union by supporting cooperative regional activities*

The USAID Mission in Liberia, USAID's Africa Bureau, and the Office of Democracy and Governance are key players in the coordination of the BRDG program.

May 2007 – The complicated issue of Liberian identity has been a divisive factor in Liberia's development since the first settlers arrived 200 years ago and is seen as a major contributor to the country's ongoing political turmoil. In the past two decades, identity has been used by political parties and warring leaders to claim injustice as well as to encourage fighting among neighbors.

Despite past injustices, Liberia is now in the process of laying a new foundation for its future. The Governance Reform Commission (GRC) has prioritized the need for Liberians to re-evaluate prevailing views of Liberian identity in the new light of a post-war, forward-moving country. This is an important intervention for building pride and preventing future conflict. The GRC also recognizes that this discussion is better initiated with children, whose lack of political motives helps depoliticize the issue. Moreover, the wide-reaching social, economic, and political changes that have occurred in Liberia over the last two decades have, perhaps, had a greater impact on children than any other group.

OTI's BRDG-Liberia program is simultaneously working with several partners to jump-start the national discussion about identity through the eyes of children. One grantee is Marion Cassell Ministries International (MACAMI), an organization that provides musical training and promotion for young artists throughout Liberia. In the spirit of national unity, MACAMI organized 100 children from diverse backgrounds into 5 neighborhood choirs. The multiethnic choirs practiced for 6 weeks, and the activity culminated in a Unification Day concert at the AME University on May 14, 2007. Each choir sang three or four traditional songs in Liberia's vernacular languages, followed by a group song in English. More than 700 people attended the concert, including political and civil society leaders. In addition, the concert was televised on Real TV and seen by more than 6,000 people. To further spread the message of a diverse yet unified Liberia, MACAMI is now recording and producing 750 CDs for distribution to government ministries, public and private institutions, universities, high schools, and radio stations. The recording will include the children singing a song in each of Liberia's 16 major languages.