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Book Review: Partnership Paradox: The Post-Conflict Reconstruction of Liberia's Education System edited by Christopher Talbot and Aleesha Taylor

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## BOOK REVIEW

***PARTNERSHIP PARADOX: THE POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION  
OF LIBERIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM***

**EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER TALBOT AND ALEESHA TAYLOR**

**OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS, 2015. 260 PAGES**

**(OPEN-SOURCE)**

**ISBN 978-1-940983-56-1**

Practitioners, scholars, and students in the education in emergencies and international development fields are well served by this recent volume, which offers descriptions and analyses of postconflict educational partnerships in Liberia between 2007 and 2012. With recent data indicating that more than half of the 121 million children who are out of school worldwide live in conflict-affected countries (UIS and UNICEF 2015), this book's contextualization of postconflict aid partnerships offers helpful insights for those involved with similar systemic educational efforts. Many of the contributing authors offer public critique of themselves, their organizations, and others; their willingness to share insider information on the formation and navigation of such partnerships can best be described as brave. This volume's focus on Liberia's recent educational history is especially interesting, given the government's announcement in 2016 of a new plan to privatize the country's public pre-primary and primary school system.

In 2007, the government of Liberia submitted a request for funding from the Education For All-Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI), even though it lacked the capacity to qualify for the initiative. Although Liberia was not one of the awardees from the catalytic fund, UNICEF, Open Society Foundations, and the Government of the Netherlands embarked on a unique partnership with the Government of Liberia that put \$20 million into a pooled fund for primary education funding, which was known as the EPF. By the end of the initiative in 2012, \$1.5 million remained in the EPF, a sign to many of the book's authors that the partnerships and the fund had failed, at least in some respects. However, this volume is transparent about the context of the challenge: in 2006, UNICEF was Liberia's de facto education ministry, while the ministry building was merely a shell; the archives had been burned for fuel by displaced people seeking shelter during the war. The EPF was in fact a partial success: Liberia secured a \$40 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education in 2010, thus demonstrating

some increase in internal capacity. In addition, the existence of remaining funds in the EPF indicates that there were some restrictions on their use. However, several of the authors in this volume describe the dangers inherent in building organizations that are focused on winning external grants and the conflicts this can create with service provision.

Sixteen authors tell the story of the EPF by reflecting on their own experiences embedded in organizations that include Open Society Foundations, UNICEF, EFA/FTI, the Ministry of Education of Liberia, WE-CARE (a Liberian NGO), the Liberian Educational Trust, the Liberia Teacher Training Program, and one organization committed to early childhood educational development. Missing are voices from some of the organizations not involved in the pooled fund yet active in Liberia's education sector, such as the Danish and British development organizations IBIS and DfID, and international NGOs such as IRC, CARE, CONCERN, and others; some authors in this volume criticize these organizations for failing to participate in the partnership.

One of the volume's main themes is ascribing the failure to fully implement the pooled fund to the misalignment of both personal and organizational cultures within different institutions. This misalignment resulted in a mutual trust gap among international NGOs, the education ministry, and Liberian NGOs. Differing rules and institutional norms related to the implementation of monitoring and evaluation and to the use of data, structures, or personnel became evident as the EPF was mobilized to build schools, provide textbooks, create central planning documents, and more. Furthermore, the technical limitations of Liberia's education ministry, given its nascent condition in the postconflict period, were not sufficiently addressed by either the ministry itself or its partnering organizations. This resulted in insufficient strategic planning for the use of the EPF: while the international partners wanted to allow for independent decision-making by the education ministry, the ministry did not have a solid process in place for making such decisions.

Highlights of this volume include Eleanor Stella Kaabwe's and Cream Wright's auto-ethnographies of postconflict financing, which provide a view into individual and organizational posturing within international agencies. Christopher Talbot's summary chapter offers a needed analysis of the history of educational planning and pooled funds in postconflict contexts. Readers wanting insights into the technical specifics of curriculum printing and of textbook critique and distribution in postconflict environments will find Keith Burchell's intricate chapter describing the textbook initiative fascinating.

There are some limitations inherent in this type of volume, with its respect for multiple voices and arguments related to the EPF. Some chapters are written in the style of a report to an organization's executive board, thus they highlight that organization and its accomplishments without much analysis or critical discussion of partnerships. Perhaps because of a desire to make each chapter stand alone, there are redundant descriptions of the pooled fund across some sections.

Overall, this volume is must-read for practitioners and academics, and those aspiring to both roles, for the lessons it offers in internal politics alone. If we believe novelist Chimamanda Adichie's (2009) advice that "many stories matter," we will find that this book, with its many stories describing the prism of this partnership fund, matters a great deal. Since the use of pooled funding is far from universal, this work highlights the ways the structures of individual organizations can be antithetical to partnerships. The apparent honesty displayed by the authors may portend a trend in which books like this serve as public accountability for NGOs or international consultants, who are sometimes accountable to the organization funding their work rather than to the communities they serve.

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and do not represent Lewis University.*

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