

Impact Objectives

- Use an innovative approach to broaden knowledge in this area by surveying people with and without disabilities and their family members
- Explore in-depth the relationship between national and international institutions and actors related to people with disabilities
- Understand how the linkages and processes between state and society are benefiting one of the most marginalised populations - persons with disabilities



A positive future

As part of a multidisciplinary initiative that is aiming to improve the lives of Liberian people with disabilities, Dr Maria Kett, Ellie Cole and Dr Mark T. Carew explain what they each bring to the table and how their research can improve lives



Dr Maria Kett



Ellie Cole



Dr Mark T. Carew

Can you begin by introducing yourselves and why you got involved in your current area of research?

MK: I am an anthropologist by training, and still enjoy the fieldwork part of my research the most! I started my career working on issues around conflict and emergencies, then went to Sri Lanka to do some research on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the tsunami response. This led to a growing interest – and expertise – in how conflict and disasters impact the lives of people with disabilities in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan and many other countries. I still work in several of those countries, but the emphasis has shifted from post-conflict to broader issues of poverty, exclusion, equity and justice.

EC: I am a global health professional, and undertake applied research on disability and development in many low-income countries, mostly in Africa. I am interested

in the interaction of disability and health, and understanding disability as an aspect of intersectionality.

MC: I am a social psychologist whose doctoral and postdoctoral work explored prejudice and discrimination within the context of disability. This research led me to South Africa, where I rapidly became interested in how my work could help elucidate and challenge the barriers facing people with disabilities within low- and middle-income settings.

Can you give us an idea of how you approached the subject of disability in Liberia?

MK: People with disabilities have been involved with the research from the outset, and this has shaped the way the research was carried out. We have also worked with the University of Liberia. This was vital, as not only has it strengthened the capacity of the university to see disability issues as important to research in its own right, but also the importance of enabling students with disabilities to access tertiary-level education. Moreover, people

with disabilities have been included as members of the research teams for both the qualitative and quantitative research.

What are the major goals of your research?

MK: We wanted to make the evidence useful to people with disabilities in Liberia. This meant producing credible data that could be presented to a range of stakeholders, as well as be useful and relevant to national level plans to support disability inclusion. One way we have done this is to show how the lives of people with disabilities compare to their non-disabled counterparts. This presents a more nuanced picture than traditional survey results.

Are you hopeful about the future of people with disabilities in Liberia?

MK: I am confident that they will continue fighting for their rights. However, there is a great deal of work to be done. It also remains to be seen what will happen with the new government. Hopefully the steps already taken by the former government will continue, and everyone in Liberia will benefit from a more positive future.



Building a better Liberia for everyone

A project led by a team at the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre, based at University College London, UK, has been investigating the conditions that enable effective poverty reduction for people with disabilities in Liberia

The people of Liberia have faced more hardship than most. A 14-year civil war that only came to an end in 2003, and more recently the Ebola virus epidemic, have taken their toll on this West African nation, but there is reason to be optimistic about its future. A long term development strategy – ‘Liberia Rising: Vision 2030’ – has been established to turn Liberia into a middle income country by 2030.

However, not everyone stands to benefit from this positive vision for Liberia’s future. In low-income countries, it is easier for the most vulnerable to get left behind, and this often includes people with disabilities. Dr Maria Kett, who heads the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre at University College London (UCL), UK, has dedicated much of her professional career to supporting people with disabilities. She notes the difficulties they face when it comes to resources, access and equity in Liberia: ‘For a long time I think there was a sense that as almost everyone is poor in Liberia, why should people with disabilities get any special treatment?’ she explains. ‘If they did, it was based on charity or pity, rather than seeing them as having equal rights as citizens.’

This is something she is hoping to change with a project she has been leading entitled ‘Understanding the Political and Institutional Conditions for Effective Poverty Reduction for Persons with Disabilities in Liberia’. By working with local people, Kett hopes to make tangible improvements to policy

and services, as well as changing attitudes towards disability. Having worked in the country for many years, she is optimistic that change will come: ‘One thing that has always struck me about Liberia is the sense that, given the opportunity, anything is possible,’ she says.

INROADS IN LIBERIA

Kett first came to work in Liberia as a consultant for a UN International Labour Organization (ILO) project working with disabled ex-combatants from the civil war. After realising the breadth of the issues involved, she decided to apply for the funding that would ultimately allow her to undertake the current project. Having worked with one of the men who was interviewed in the ILO project, she saw how his life was transformed through the support of disabled people’s organisations, and indeed the UN programme itself. This cemented her view that Liberia was somewhere where real impact could be achieved.

With initial support from the UN, particularly colleagues in the UN Mission in Liberia Human Rights and Protection Section, Kett was able to forge partnerships with local actors and organisations, including the country’s National Commission on Disability, National Union of Organisations of the Disabled (in particular Naomi Harris and Boakai Nyehn), and staff members at the University of Liberia, including Richard Ngafuan and Professor Sekou Konneh. The way disability is viewed is highly dependent

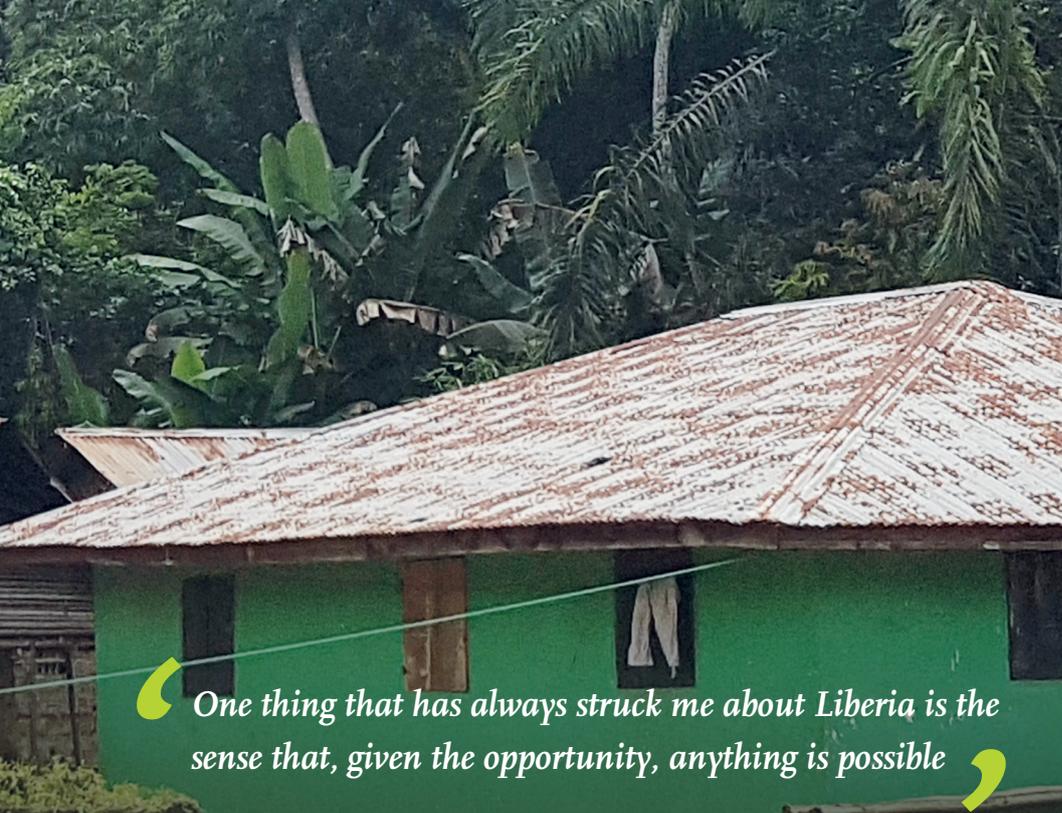
on culture, so close collaboration was essential. These local connections have provided an excellent opportunity for an international research team to really get to grips with some intimate challenges faced by Liberian society. ‘I wanted the opportunity to collaborate with and learn from academics and other stakeholders working on disability issues within these settings, all the while keeping an applied research focus,’ explains Dr Mark Carew, a research fellow at the UCL Centre who is part of Kett’s team.

The most important collaborators for the UCL team are the Liberians with disabilities themselves. Kett and her team are committed to the philosophy of ‘nothing about us without us’, presenting and discussing results with them and taking their feedback into account. ‘We have ensured the people with disabilities have been front and centre of this research; they have been involved from the start, including as members of the research team,’ says Kett.

COMPARING HOUSEHOLDS

At the start of the project, there was a huge knowledge gap when it came to disability in Liberia, let alone how it interacted with other issues such as poverty. Even the prevalence of disabilities given by the national census in 2008 – 3 per cent – was contested, with some suggesting that such a low figure was unlikely given the country’s recent history.

The Liberian government have made it clear that they want to include people with disabilities in the policies and programmes



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that they are implementing to alleviate poverty, but to do that they need to understand the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Kett and her team set out to examine such experiences in order to inform policy development and service planning. It is assumed that disability contributes to inequality and poverty in Liberia, but they wanted to find out how exactly. Specifically, they decided to survey families that have at least one member with a disability, and compare them to corresponding control families with no disabled members. Wellbeing indicators were assessed across different members within the households and then the data collected were analysed. 'We have undertaken quite a complex survey at both household and intra-household level,' explains Kett. 'Our findings really highlight the importance of the intra-household analysis.'

The researchers surveyed 2,020 respondents, as well as conducting 22 focus group discussions for people with disabilities and 30 interviews with key stakeholders such as community leaders. As team member Dr Tim Colbourn reports, the devastating Ebola virus outbreak between 2014-15 delayed work for a while. The researchers returned to a changed and traumatised country to conduct a further round of focus group interviews with Ebola survivors, and included new questions in the survey concerning the impact of the outbreak on people with disabilities.

LOBBYING FOR CHANGE

Having collected and analysed all of their data the team has begun disseminating their findings. They recently made a preliminary

presentation in Liberia's capital, Monrovia, and they have compiled together a summary of their findings. Their conclusions are nuanced, but there are several ideas that emerge very clearly. These include lack of expectations when it comes to state support, lack of disability training for healthcare workers, and an increased risk of multidimensional poverty for people with disabilities – particularly if they are women. These are all areas that can and must be addressed at a state level. At the event in Monrovia, the researchers were able to partner with the United Nations Development Programme to discuss the development of a National Action Plan on disability. This, they hope, will be their lasting legacy in Liberia.

The team is optimistic about the effects their work will have. 'The applied nature of our research, and the networks and collaborations we have in Liberia, will hopefully mean that our results have a significant positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities in the country,' says Ellie Cole, the research coordinator at the Centre. Recently there has been much more support to improve the lives of these people, but Kett is keen to emphasise that most of the drive for change comes from within the disabled community. They have been the ones on the front line, lobbying and making their voices heard. From the perspective of Kett and her colleagues, their role is to support these people in their fight for recognition and change.

Project Insights

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BIOS

Dr Maria Kett is the Head of the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre, UCL and Honorary Reader in Disability and Development. An anthropologist by training, Kett has extensive experience of applied research in the disability and international development arena, with a particular interest in international health, education and measures to alleviate poverty.

Ellie Cole is the research coordinator at the Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre. She is a global health professional with experience undertaking applied research on disability and development in low-income countries.

Dr Mark T. Carew is a social psychologist, and the Centre's quantitative research expert. He has a background in disability research and his research interests encompass the numerous barriers that people with disabilities face around the world.

