



Photo Credit: Mercy Corps Liberia

PROSPECTS PRACTICE PAPER NO. 4: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Fostering lasting behavioural change

JUNE 2016¹

Written by Brittney M Norton²

The term 'experiential learning' is often mistakenly used to describe any learning experience that involves participatory activities. This paper presents an overview of what true experiential learning is and how this form of learning allows for real-world application - thus promoting lasting behavioural change. Furthermore, it explains how experiential learning was adopted as the methodological core of the Prospects psychosocial programme in Liberia, which builds 'pre-employment skills' in 3,500 vulnerable youth aged 15-24 years. The goal of the paper is to provide other youth and education development practitioners with a resource that can be used to strengthen youth and behaviour change programmes through the incorporation of the experiential learning theory. In addition, this paper explains its application in the Prospects programme, before concluding with key considerations of such a design.

¹ Find out more at prospectsliberia.com

² Brittney M Norton worked as a short-term consultant on the Prospects psychosocial programme. She can be reached at norton.m.brittney@gmail.com or Brittney.Norton@mail.sit.edu.

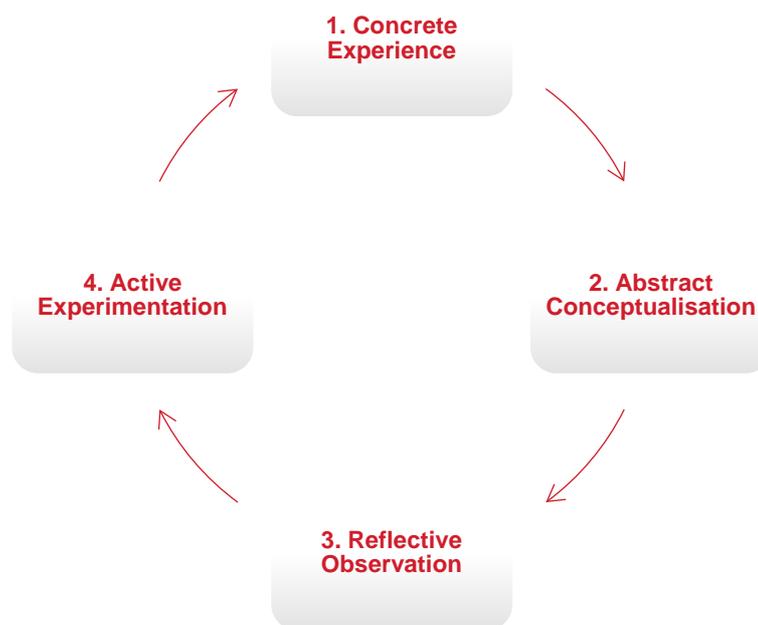
PROSPECTS PROGRAMME, LIBERIA

Prospects is a youth empowerment program implemented by Mercy Corps and funded by the Swedish Embassy in Liberia and Chevron which seeks to equip young Liberians with the skills, information, and opportunities to find meaningful and sustainable employment or self-employment. Prospects combines direct service delivery with efforts to stimulate positive systemic changes in terms of youths' role in the labour and job hiring markets. The program works across the full spectrum of youth demographics, engaging over 11,000 youth through a range of services, including psychosocial support, on-the-job training, entrepreneurial support, skills training and job matching services.

1. Introduction to Experiential Learning

While there have been a number of contributors to the modern development of the experiential learning theory (ELT), one of its key pioneers is David Kolb, who developed the experiential learning cycle. This model conceptualises sustainable learning as a four-stage process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The four Stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle



- › **Concrete Experience:** Provides an opportunity for participants to actively engage in some form of goal-orientated experience or activity. This can be in the form of a teambuilding, problem-solving, or other practical exercise.
- › **Reflective Observation:** After the experience, participants step back and reflect on what was experienced. This step requires a great deal of discussion, feedback, as well as individual reflection.
- › **Abstract Conceptualisation:** This involves participants forming an understanding or learning from the experience by drawing connections between what they have just done and knowledge or experiences they already have.

- Active Experimentation:** Allows participants the opportunity to apply their learning in their everyday life. This can be through a brainstorm where they create a new plan to apply moving forward or by directly applying their learning through repeating the activity.³

While all learners must go through this seemingly structured process for it to be considered experiential learning- or to contribute to lasting behavioural change- the theory is at its core a very fluid and adaptive method of teaching and learning. Unlike in traditional classrooms, the goal of experiential learning is not for participants to know certain information, but rather for learners to discover it on their own. Facilitators of experiential learning programs therefore never provide learners with the answer; rather facilitators' roles are to set-up an activity and facilitate the reflection of it, in a way that enables participants to interpret their own learning and meaning from the experience provided. It is the self-discovery of learning and meaning that leads to sustainable behaviour change as it replicates authentic life-experiences.

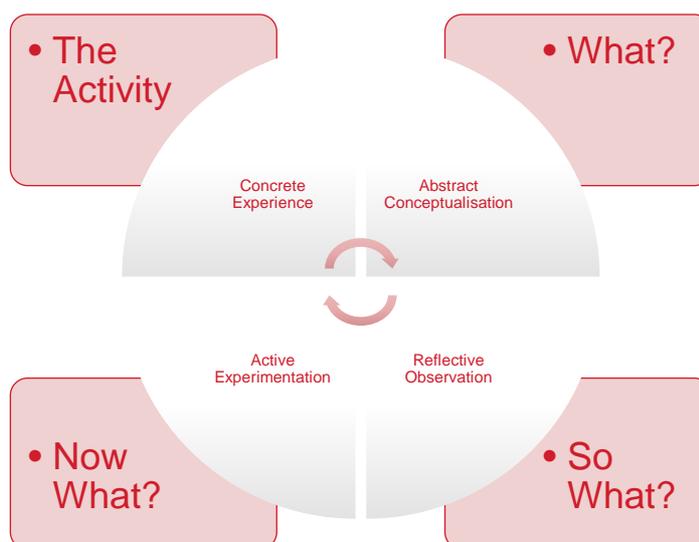
2. Experiential Learning in Prospects

OVERVIEW OF THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROGRAMME

The Prospects Psychosocial Programme is a livelihoods intervention which utilises a psychosocial approach. The programme creates and works with 130 community-based self-help youth groups, supporting them to implement tailored Group Development Plans (composed of a series of micro-projects which include VSLA, Community Theatre, Group Business, Creating a Youth Space and others. Based upon analysis of their situation and challenges, groups select and implement micro-projects over a period of a year, with planning and implementation support from Prospects staff. These projects are designed to build key pre-employment and life skills. In particular, the programme aims to develop participants' self-agency, decision-making, planning, financial literacy, teamwork and resilience.

The above theory was adopted as the methodology of the Prospects psychosocial programme as it is believed to be the best method to achieve the core objective of the program by indirectly supporting livelihood outcomes through fostering behaviour change so that participants are better prepared to take the required steps to actively seek employment and maintain employment. This section describes how the experiential learning theory was integrated into the design of the programme and adapted in order to fit the programme's specific needs.

Figure 2: The version of the Experiential Learning Cycle adopted by Prospects.



³ For more information on the ELT refer to: Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.

All of the curriculum and projects created for the psychosocial programme were designed with the intent of guiding participants through Kolb's experiential learning cycle described in the above section. The programme uses a simplified version of the cycle in order to allow facilitators to more easily support participants through the different phases. This simplified version (Figure 2) uses a combination of practical experiences, activities and guided reflection to support the participants' learning process. The practical activity replicates the concrete experience stage of Kolb's learning cycle for the learner and the guided reflection allows participants to pass through the following three phases through asking strategic questions. To ensure staff are able to facilitate the reflection process, all program curriculum is designed to follow each activity with a series of reflection questions broken up into three sections referred to as *what?*, *so what?* and *now what?*. Those three sections represent the final three phases of the experiential learning cycle, as described below.

- What?:** Representing the *Reflective Observation* stage, asks participants to describe what happened during the experience. This includes describing the facts and observations.
- So What?:** Guides participants through the *Abstract Conceptualisation* stage by considering why the experiences unfolded as they did, how it connects to previous experiences they have had, and why the learning matters at all.
- Now What?:** Otherwise known as the *Active Experimentation* stage, is the most important phase of the questioning as it forces participants to brainstorm how they will put their learning into action in their everyday life. Doing this provides context to the learning and thus increases the likelihood of participants utilising their learning to improve their livelihood outcomes. This can also take the form of repeating the activity or experience in order to immediately apply the learning gained.

3. Making it Work

While the Prospects psychosocial programme is still in the implementation stage, we have identified four key factors that have enabled the successful integration of the experiential learning theory into programme interventions thus far.

#3 Why are setting goals important?- 30 minutes

EXPLAIN: We have discussed what a goal is, but now we need to look at why it is important to our lives. To do this, I am going to read a story about two brothers/sisters.

READ:

Prince/Princess and Peter/Josephine are twin brother/sisters. Growing up they were very close and did everything together. Their parents worked hard to send them both to school so they can have good futures. Prince/Princess always wanted to be a doctor so s/he worked very hard in school, especially the sciences. If s/he did bad on an exam s/he made sure to study harder the next time. Peter/Josephine did not have any plans for her/his life, s/he just wanted to have fun and did not focus on his/her lessons. Eventually, Peter/Josephine stopped going to school to ride moto bikes/sell small things even though his/her parents asked him/her not to. Prince/Princess continued to work hard at school and graduated the top of his/her class and went on to college. After many years, Prince/Josephine was successful in becoming a doctor and made plenty money. Peter/Josephine was still riding the moto bike/selling small things.

DISCUSS:

What?

- What was that story about?
- Did each of the brothers/sisters have a goal for their life? What was their goal?
- Did one of the brothers/sisters face challenges when working to achieve their goal?
(Prince/Josephine studied harder when they received poor grades)

So What?

- How did having a goal make Peter/Princess succeed in life?
- What do you think Peter/Josephine could have done to have a better life?
- Why is it important for you to have goals? In your own life and in the group.

Now what?

- What goals do you all think you can work towards in your own life? In this group?

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Time for 'reflection' is often overlooked in trainings and programs as it can be seen as time-consuming and cumbersome. Many believe it is much easier to provide learners with the answer or solution rather than waiting for them to come to it themselves. The Psychosocial Programme developed a body of curricula that pays just as much attention to guided reflection as it does to the direct activities. All curricula developed for the programme provides a detailed structure of individual program interventions, including the specific objectives of each session, activities to be facilitated, and questions to be asked. By doing this, the psychosocial program is better able to ensure that the ELT is integrated in all program activities.

1: Building Strong Facilitation Skills of Staff

Liberia's education system is largely based on the banking method, where the teacher recites information that students are meant to write in notebooks and memorise for tests. Teachers are therefore seen as the primary source of information and knowledge; this does not provide space for learners to form their own beliefs, decisions, or learning. As such, the experiential learning theory can be a foreign method of teaching or facilitation within the Liberian context. To overcome this, during program start-up, a series of training of trainers (TOT) workshops were developed and held for Mercy Corps staff and implementing partners.⁴ We have found that investing in staff and partner development opportunities has the following programmatic benefits:



- ✓ Creates buy-in for the experiential learning methodology among field staff, thus increasing its actual usage in the field.
- ✓ Improves facilitation skills of field staff and subsequently the quality of programme delivery.
- ✓ In turn this increases behaviour change to be promoted effectively across the program.

Psychosocial facilitator practices facilitating the 'human knot' activity with their colleagues.

In addition to facilitating trainings, the programme also performs routine field visits where real-time coaching and feedback is provided to staff and partners. Doing this ensures the quality of programme delivery and better prepares facilitators to stray from the curriculum to adapt to participants' needs while maintaining the integrity of the experiential learning process.

As well as incorporating the experiential learning theory into curriculum, staff training also prepares facilitators to incorporate it into their everyday mentorship and coaching of participants. For example, when one group was having a misunderstanding over how to spend group money, one of the programme's facilitators asked if they remembered the story of the four blind men and the elephant.⁵ The story is about needing multiple perspectives in order to understand the full picture. Once mentioned, the group instantly realised their mistake in not listening to one another and quickly came to a compromise. By providing the group with simple coaching, the facilitator is able to guide, but not tell the group how to solve their challenges.



"Do you remember the story of the Four Blind men and the Elephant?"

— (Psychosocial Facilitator to participants in New Buchanan, Grand Bassa County)

⁴ The programme collaborates with four local non-profit organizations who are responsible for implementing several of the micro-projects.

⁵ One day, a man leading an elephant came upon five blind men sitting by the side of the road. As he passed, one of the blind men called out: "Who is it on the road?" "It is I and my elephant," said the man. The blind man had never encountered an elephant before. "Pray, stop so that we may discover what an elephant is like!" said one of the blind men. The elephant driver did as he was asked. The blind men gathered around the elephant. The first man, touching the elephant's great side, said: "Oh, now I know what an elephant is like! It is like a huge wall!" The second man, touching the elephant's trunk, said: "No, no – an elephant is like a great snake!" "You are both wrong," said the third man, wrapping his arms around one of the elephant's legs, "An elephant is very much like a tree trunk!" Touching one of the elephant's tusks, the fourth man said: "How could you possibly think such things? I tell you, this elephant is like a branch of a tree!" The fifth man, holding the elephant's tail, said: "Let me settle this for us all – an elephant is most like a brush." And the five blind men set to arguing as to who was right. Continuing on his way, the elephant driver said to himself, "Really, each of those men is right. But it is only if they listen to each other that they will come to discover what an elephant is truly like."

2. Allowing Room for Failure and growth

Unlike many development projects, the Prospects programme is designed to allow for the initial failure of participants. The experiential learning cycle encourages that learners struggle through the *Concrete Experience* stage; it is those struggles that are reflected upon and learned from during the *Abstract Conceptualisation* and *Reflective Observation* stages. While struggle is essential, equally so is the provision of room for growth: if participants are not sufficiently supported through the *Active Experimentation* stage, lasting behaviour change will never take root. Youth need time to struggle through challenges, form learning, and most importantly put that learning into action. As such, when designing experiential learning programs it is important to plan for sufficient time and support that will allow participants to repeat activities in order to arrive at more successful outcomes.

This can be done within a single training session, though providing time for youth to repeat activities. In the Prospects programme's curriculum, the "Now What?" stage of the processing questions asks participants if they want to put their brainstormed plan into action. For instance, in a psychosocial activity, such as 'Sharks'⁶, participants will often struggle to reach the objective of building empathy and working as a team and subsequently many participants will fail to achieve the activity's objective (make it to an island)⁷. When this happens, it is important to pause, allow participants to reflect on the experience. In the case of Sharks, participants are guided to reflect on how it felt to watch team members fail to reach safety and to consider alternative strategies they could have taken to avoid this. In the below image, after reflecting on how the group could ensure all participants 'win' by making it to an island, the group put it into action through assisting each other in order to all fit on a single island. A second round of reflection should then be facilitated to discuss the difference between the first and second round and about what behaviour groups should adopt when working as a group in their everyday lives.



Youth participating in the 'sharks' activity in Sugar Hill Community in Gbarnga, Bong County.

On a larger scale, the programme sets participants up for failure and growth by allowing participants to repeat entire microprojects. All groups participate in two Group Business projects, which are strategically placed apart from one another to allow groups to encounter challenges the first time round, strategise how to create a stronger more profitable businesses, and apply their learning through creating a new business or strengthening their old one.

⁷ Sharks is a group activity that promotes empathy and teamwork. To facilitate 'Sharks', the facilitator marks a large area and lay out pieces of flip chart paper or other markers. The facilitator tells the group that s/he is just walking around 'swimming' and when the facilitator claps or blows a whistle a shark is near and everyone must run to an island. When the facilitator claps twice participants can return to the water. Slowly the facilitator reduces the size of the islands making it more difficult for all participants to succeed. Typically this causes all participants into a 'fight for survival mode' where they only care about themselves making it to the island. Through reflection, participants can see that helping their teammates make it to the island is not only important but also makes them feel psychologically better.

3. Promoting Youth Ownership

A core component of the experiential learning cycle is that participants control their own learning. Facilitators may provide the experience and guidance, but it is left to the learner to interpret meaning from it and apply it in their everyday life. In the Prospects programme, youth ownership is not only promoted through allowing participants to select their own micro-projects, but also through allowing them to implement them. As an example, 'Youth Leadership & Community Service' is a micro-project which is implemented directly by youth with little facilitation from staff. The groups who choose the micro-project are given a small cash grant to implement a community-based project. Below are two projects taken on by various groups in Grand Bassa County. To the left, a group built a wall around their local water pump in order to better ensure its cleanliness by keeping out animals and passer-byes. Comprised of 15-19 year old boys, the group enlisted the help of a local community member who was willing to do the labour free of charge. The boys then painted the wall. To the right, is another water pump that was broken for several years. The group approached their local Public Works office in order to identify the problem and put their resources together to purchase the parts needed and required labour. After its completion, they built a fence around it using local bamboo.



Through implementing the above projects on their own, participants practice their problem-solving, resource mobilisation, and organisation skills. Furthermore, these projects are designed to develop a sense of accomplishment, through the youth knowing that they directly chose, planned, and implemented a project of benefit to their entire community.

'Youth Space' is another micro-project designed and implemented directly by the youth. In Big Fanti Town in Grand Bassa County, the two groups there put the small cash grant provided to both in order to fund the foundation of a youth centre in their community. The land and additional resources needed to complete the project were provided by the community leaders, demonstrating to the youth that resources exist within their community that can help them address community challenges.



4. Integration of experiential learning in M&E Tools

Perhaps a greater challenge than implementing a high-quality and sustainable behaviour change programme, is creating supporting monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Prospects Practice Paper No.2 discusses how effective M&E systems require balancing the ability to *prove* the impact of an

intervention, as well as providing critical information to enable the program to *improve* its service delivery during the program lifecycle.⁸

In order to ensure that M&E supports programme implementation, the Psychosocial Programme uses a rigorous quantitative baseline/endline to evaluate information on impact, but complements this with a qualitative participatory tool designed to enable real-time outcome monitoring at the facilitator-level, and a mechanism to promote experiential learning at the participant-level. The tool is implemented on a monthly basis with each group by programme facilitators and applies the same reflective questioning found in the programme's curriculum, but instead of focusing on a singular activity it allows participants the opportunity to reflect on the programme as a whole and how it is impacting their lives. It also looks at challenges and issues that youth are facing outside the direct program, thus providing a space to think about application of learnings in real life. A sample of questions asked during these monthly-follow-up visits can be seen below:

- › **What?** What Projects have been implemented in the last month? What group-led activities have been held?
- › **So What?** How is the group benefiting from the project? What strategies have been done to receive these benefits? What challenges have there been that have prevented the group from benefiting from this project(s)? How is this program impacting your life outside of the group? How is it impacting your community?
- › **Now What?** What are the group's goals for the next month? What strategies will they use to achieve these?

This process allows participants to reflect on how they can grow as an individual and as a group through brainstorming solutions to their challenges, and through setting short-term goals. This approach also has benefits for facilitators, as it allows them to monitor the success of both groups and implementing partners. Furthermore, it allows facilitators to quickly recognise and address any negative unintended consequences of the program activities. Finally, through enquiring about successes and program impacts, staff are encouraged to focus on programmatic outcomes (changes in behaviour) rather than just the activities or microprojects that are being delivered.



› IN PRACTICE: QUICK INTERVENTION

When Vivian, a Mercy Corps facilitator, conducted a monthly follow-up visit she noticed that the attendance in one of her groups had dramatically dropped.

Through the what?, so what?, now what? questioning, she found that many youth had become disenchanted because they could not afford the minimum savings amount in the VSLA micro-project (set at 100 LD or 1.20 USD).

From this information, Vivian was able to coach the group through this challenge. With her support, the group decided that a minimum amount of 20 LD would be more realistic for the majority of participants. The quick intervention allowed the group to remain together and prompted the team to limit the minimum savings amount in other groups to avoid similar problems from arising.

Above, a group of girls hold their weekly VSLA meeting.

⁸ See Prospects blog, <https://prospectsliberia.com/2016/05/05/practice-paper-built-to-improve-leveraging-realtime-me-for-adaptive-youth-employment-programming/>

4. Challenges

This section discusses challenges that Prospects has encountered thus far and the steps that have been taken to mitigate them.

- › **Time management** is often viewed as a universal challenge in project management as staff are often given tight schedules to complete a prescribed set of deliverables. This has proven to be a heightened challenge within the psychosocial programme as, when faced with time constraints, and unless efforts are made otherwise, the experiential learning process is often the first to be forgone in the delivery of projects. If facilitators are struggling to complete a training within an allotted time frame, there is a tendency for time for reflection or for participants to repeat activities to be replaced with an explanation of what was meant to be the core objective of an activity. Doing this naturally removes participants' ability to form their own learning and reduces the likely hood that the intervention will lead to long-term behaviour change. This is a difficult challenge to overcome as it is omnipresent in the development sector, but Prospects has attempted to decrease its effect on the quality of program delivery by: 1) shortening curriculum to ensure it can be completed within the allotted time frame; 2) holding after-action reviews to allow staff to reflect on where it might have been difficult to maintain the experiential learning cycle during implementation and suggest improvements⁹; and 3) conducting random monitoring of field activities to provide real-time feedback to facilitators on how they can better integrate the experiential learning theory into the project delivery.
- › **Gaining stakeholder buy-in** is another challenge Prospects was confronted with during the adoption of the experiential learning theory, and one with the potential of derailing the intended impact of interventions. Prospects works hard to not only gain compliance, but also support for its program interventions and methodologies. Staff and partners need to not only understand the experiential learning theory, but be convinced that the impact it has on participants is stronger than when using other approaches that they may have been exposed to in the past. Initially, the adoption of the experiential learning theory was perceived as just an additional task that facilitators were asked to perform. Once facilitators where able to see how its use facilitated deeper learning and behaviour change in participants, they naturally incorporated it into all aspects of the program intervention.
- › **Staff capacity and understanding** of the experiential learning theory constitutes a further key factor governing the successfulness of its implementation. Although the Prospects curriculum was designed to easily support facilitators as they guide participants through the experiential learning process, an additional cycle of continual training was required in order to ensure that staff possessed the skills to adapt to participants' needs in the field. For instance, during the reflection of activities, facilitators are often required to push participants to form deeper connections and learning through asking follow-up or probing questions outside of those outlined in the curriculum. From Prospects' experience, a single stand-alone training is unlikely to be sufficient to build these skills. Rather, these skills are developed over time, and require a process of on-going coaching and feedback.

⁹ For more information on how Prospects has utilised after-action reviews and other adaptive management tools, refer to Prospects Practice Paper No.1, *Adaptive Management in Practice*. Available at: <https://prospectsliberia.com/2016/04/04/practice-paper-adaptive-management-in-practice/>

5. Conclusion

While this paper focused on using the experiential learning theory to foster lasting behaviour change in vulnerable youth, the theory can be adapted for a number of learning and behaviour change programs. It is especially useful when working with those unfamiliar or uncomfortable in the traditional classroom setting, including adult learners. The overall aim of this paper is that it provides others with a practical resource to refer to when integrating the ELT methodology into development interventions.

Publications in the Series

Practice Papers:

Chris Maclay, *Adaptive Management in Practice*, Prospects Practice Paper No.1, April 2016

John Skelton and Chris Maclay, *Build to Improve: Leveraging Real-time M&E for Adaptive Youth Employment Programming*, Prospects Practice Paper No.2, May 2016

Eli Slama and the Prospects Team, *The Prospects Apprenticeship Programme: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Prospects Practice Paper No.3, May 2016

Learning Papers:

Prospects Team, *Barriers to Employment Facing Young Women in Liberia*, Prospects Learning Paper No.1, September 2015

Emily Kremser, *Pre-employment Challenges Facing vulnerable Youth in Liberia*, Prospects Learning Paper No.2, November 2015

Chris Maclay and John Skelton, *Complex Paths: Supporting Mixed Livelihoods in Liberia*, Prospects Learning Paper No.3, January 2016

Alba Topulli, *Real Talk with Liberia's Youth and Employers*, Prospects Learning Paper No.4, April 2016

Cassiane Cladis, *Cashing in on Cash Transfers*, Prospects Learning Paper No. 5, May 2016

CONTACT

ROSE HEMMER-VITTI

Results, Learning & Research Manager | Prospects Programme

rhemmervitti@mercycorps.org

NATE CROSSLEY

Programme Manager | Prospects Programme

crossley@mercycorps.org

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

Acknowledgement

Mercy Corps' Prospects program is made possible through the generous support of the Swedish Embassy in Monrovia and Chevron. The findings in this report do not represent the opinions of either institution.



45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842

40 Sciennes
Edinburgh, EH9 1NJ

mercycorps.org