PROSPECTS PRACTICE PAPER
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APPRENTICESHIP
PROGRAMME, LIBERIA

A guide to design and implementation

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Eli Slama and the Prospects team

Apprenticeship programmes hold the promise of smoothing the school-to-work transition through connecting unemployed youth with jobs, adding critical work experience to CVs, and building both soft skills and technical skills that can only be learned from practice. Particularly in contexts where technical or vocational training is weak, apprenticeships can be a vital step in preparing youth for employment. By hardwiring directly into private enterprise, such schemes are designed to build skills that are in demand in the labour market. This Practice Paper describes Mercy Corps’ Prospects apprenticeship programme in Liberia which has already facilitated over 1,000 apprenticeships in three urban centres of Liberia, with around half being offered jobs. The first part describes the methodology of the programme, taking the reader through the

1 Find out more at prospectsliberia.com
2 The Prospects team was fortunate to benefit from Eli Slama who provided pro bono consulting for both writing and illustration between January and February 2016.
programme’s main sequential components and providing guidance for replication. The second section highlights some of the key learnings and refinements that have taken place over the last few years, and which have shaped success of the current programme. The purpose of the paper is both to document the methodology of a successful market-driven apprenticeship programme and to highlight its most important conceptual considerations, drawing attention to the process of adaptation that was crucial in the coalescing of the existing model.

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. Liberia’s employment context and ripeness for apprenticeships
Liberia’s urban youth (ages 15-35) experience high levels of employment-instability in low paying, largely informal jobs. A large majority (a reported 78 percent) fall under the International Labour Organization’s ‘Vulnerable Employment’ category.\(^3\) Importantly, national institutions struggle to mitigate barriers to employment. For example, as the Liberian government’s National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) policy 2015-2020 highlights, ‘management roles and responsibilities of TVET administration are shared amongst several public institutions - thus serving as a disincentive for coordination and execution of programmes’. It further notes an ‘absence of linkages between skills that are supplied by TVET institutions and the industry’ as well as an ‘absence of an accreditation and standardisation framework for TVET’.\(^4\) At the same time, Prospects’ own market research found that 46% of employers saw work history and experience as the most important part of a CV.

Mercy Corps’ Prospects apprenticeship programme was developed to offer an effective and educational component to help address the skills gap many youth face. During the first phase of the programme, 496 youth (40 percent female) completed apprenticeships with 106 different businesses. So far in phase two, 585 youth have enrolled in apprenticeships (47 percent female), in 98 businesses. Of the 420 Phase II


youth who have completed apprentices at the time of writing, 50 percent have been offered and accepted jobs at the host business following the three-month apprenticeship. Of those, just over half (52 percent) receive monthly pay, a quarter are paid commission, 11 percent are paid on a contract basis, with the remainder paid on a stipend basis. Data collected so far suggests that retention has reasonable longevity: a study of 26 apprentices who were offered jobs by the host business found that the majority (16) were still employed with the business more than six months after completing the apprenticeship, with average monthly pay equivalent to USD 123.

Follow up research with a separate set of apprentices presents indicative findings of the impact of apprenticeships on youths’ portfolios of work. From a sample of 29 youth were retained in host businesses following the completion of their apprenticeship, prior to undertaking the apprenticeship, just three of these youth had enjoyed full-time jobs, of which none had been paid on a regular basis. While these youth had not been devoid of any income generating activities, the majority reported partially relying on family members for financial support. Following their apprenticeships, more than half (17) were offered full-time work and paid on a monthly basis.

2. The Prospects apprenticeship programme: how it works

The Prospects apprenticeship programme involves eight primary sequential stages. This section provides details of each stage in turn.

1. Business Outreach
2. Business Application & Assessment
3. Publishing of Catalogue & Youth Applications
4. Shortlisting, Interviews and Selection
5. Pre-Deployment Training
6. Placement & Monitoring
7. Graduation & Outcome Tracking
8. Follow-on Training
Step 1: Business Outreach

The key strategy of the Prospects apprenticeship programme is that it is market-driven. Rather than recruiting and then placing youth, Prospects starts with the employers. Outreach to businesses is done through newspapers, radio, using directories and/or listings of businesses, and door-to-door. What is crucial about the business outreach is the framing of the opportunities: with no financial incentives paid towards businesses (see section 3), the latter must see the value of the apprenticeships – they are not doing anyone a favour, but rather being given the opportunity to find high quality young staff through the programme. It is also an opportunity for employers to test out potential young employees without having to make a long-term commitment.

Prospects’ experience has found that labour-intensive door-to-door and direct contact using business listings has been most effective initially (as employers do not immediately see value), but that once a reputation for delivering a high-quality service has been achieved, businesses will return directly and recommend others.

Step 2: Business Application and Assessment

Businesses that are interested in becoming involved with the programme submit an application outlining specifically what positions they are looking to fill. For each position, businesses must provide clarity on what education levels and skills they require (although they cannot require significant experience), as well as the number of vacancies they are offering. These applications are then assessed against the following criteria:

- Safety of the working environment, including gender considerations.
- Logistical capacity to host meaningful apprenticeships with a genuine learning outcome.
- Capacity for sufficient support and mentoring.
- Potential to actually provide jobs at the end of the apprenticeship.

With the opportunity of free labour, some requests are inappropriate, which makes this step so important.

For example, one car dealership asked for 4 accountants, but only had one computer, meaning that the learning objective was reduced.

Another beauty salon asked for 3 beauticians, but worked at a family level so were unrealistically going to employ anyone at the end of the apprenticeship.

This assessment is key to ensuring quality of apprenticeship opportunities.
Based on scores on the above criteria, Mercy Corps evaluates how many, if any, of the requested positions can be fulfilled.

**Step 3: Publishing of Catalogue and Youth Applications**

Recruitment is competitive, and seeks to simulate some of the experiences involved in normal job applications, including written applications and interviews. Generally, Mercy Corps receives between three and ten applicants per position. All applicants must be under age 35, but beyond that standard criteria, each position has its own profile – this allows for diversity in apprentices, with some university graduates applying for positions like accountant assistants, and others with little education applying for positions they are qualified for, such as waiters. A young person who identifies a suitable apprenticeship fills out an application form and submits it along with a passport-size photo to the Youth Opportunity Centers, or via any of the application boxes spread in various locations. Rather than applying to the ‘programme’, young people apply to the specific position that seems most relevant to them. This means that they can find a position which matches their education and skills, as well as one in a commutable location, or with an employer which interests them. Application forms are brief, covering key education and profile information, as well as two narrative sections in which the applicant explains why he or she matches the criteria.

**Step 4: Shortlisting Interviews and Selection**

Mercy Corps collects, reviews and assesses the applications against the criteria set by the host business. Short-listed candidates are then interviewed by a panel comprised of the host business and a representative from Mercy Corps. Prior to interviewing, business representatives are made aware of Mercy Corps’ standards regarding employment conditions and worker-rights, with an emphasis on tackling gender-based discrimination. The representative also guides the employer in interview techniques. Interviews include core questions provided by Mercy Corps, additional questions from the host business, and the opportunity for practical testing (for example, if a candidate applies to be a mechanic, the employer may want to check that the applicant knows her/his way around a car). Successful candidates are chosen based on a set scoring form and notified shortly after interviewing.

**CONVENIENT APPLICATION PROCESS**

Apprenticeship opportunities are incorporated into an Apprenticeship Catalogue, which lists each individual vacancy and is made available for youth to apply in key areas of the community such as TVET institutions as well as Prospects’ Youth Opportunity Centers.

**RECONCILING DEMAND-DRIVEN PRINCIPLE WITH GENDER CONSIDERATIONS**

One challenge of a demand-driven approach is the challenging of gender stereotypes. For example, it is rare in Liberia for girls to be trained as mechanics, or boys in beauty. The linking of youth with particular skills to job opportunities may logically therefore tend to reinforce rather than challenge these traditions. As such, it is difficult to break gender stereotypes directly through the apprenticeship intervention. However, other components of Prospects program do aim to address these issues (such as particular support provided to aspiring female entrepreneurs with presenting business plans to investors).
Step 5: Pre-deployment training

Prior to beginning their placements, apprentices receive a suite of trainings developed by Mercy Corps Prospects team and delivered by Prospects trainers, in order to ensure that they are effectively prepared for their placements:

- **Career planning** (2 sessions): Participants are encouraged to assess their aspirations in relation to demands in the labour market. They learn concepts and acquire tools necessary for long- and medium-term career strategic planning. The training also helps participants to recognise the value of apprenticeships in the context of their wider skill development and career growth.

- **Work readiness and soft skills** (4 sessions): These sessions cover the key interpersonal and behavioural skills that are required in a professional environment, such as work ethics (professional conduct), responsibility and reliability, time management, communication, dress code, team work, customer service, problem-solving and leadership.
Step 6: Placement and Monitoring

Prospects staff continuously provide support and encouragement to apprentices during the placement, as well as serve as focal points for employers in case of problems. Monthly on-site check-ups are performed to verify that the apprentices go to work, that they receive proper training, are treated well and that they work under suitable conditions.

Apprentices work five or six days a week for a period of three months under the supervision and instruction of their hosting supervisors.

Photo Credit: Mercy Corps Liberia

To cover travel and food expenses, Mercy Corps provides apprentices with a monthly sum of USD 70 via a mobile money transfer system. This payment is conditional upon submission to Mercy Corps of an attendance report, signed by both apprentice and supervisor. This report also contains space for apprentices to provide feedback to Mercy Corps on his or her experience, and thus enables Prospects staff to respond to dissatisfactions or problems.

“Thanks to Mercy Corps for what they did for me. My dream was to work at Royal and made it comes true. Thanks to Royal for the training.

— (Apprentice at The Royal Hotel, Monrovia)
MOBILE MONEY TRANSFERS
Mobile money offers a tool to enhance the ease of business payments and enable access to (e)savings for unbanked populations in countries with underdeveloped credit/banking systems. All participants register to the program with their own unique SIM card, which is linked to a personal mobile money account. They can then visit any service point operated by the Liberian Lonestar Cell MTN company and withdraw the desired amount desired.

Prospects’ experiences of mobile money are encouraging. Beyond being a convenient and efficient system for cash transfers in a limited structural environment, it also has the added benefit of promoting financial literacy and savings. Since each account is locked by a personal password, the corruptibility of the cash transfer process is minimized, while a clear tractable paper trail from transfer to withdrawal is maintained. Program findings point to nearly 50 percent of apprentices continuing to use mobile money regularly after graduating from the program. This is particularly encouraging since mobile money is not yet widespread in Liberia.

Step 7: Graduation and Outcome Tracking
Upon completion, apprentices are invited to fill out a feedback questionnaire which evaluates the quality of their training, the extent to which learning outcomes were achieved, and whether or not they were retained in the host business as an employee. This information forms part of the Prospects M&E and learning system and is updated in real-time, allowing programme managers to constantly review programme results and make strategic adaptations (as discussed below). Moreover, outcome tracking on job offers is used to inform continued business outreach: businesses that fail to hire any of their apprentices are not accepted for future cohorts of apprenticeships, ensuring that the programme focuses consistently on outcomes.

![% Apprentices Offered Jobs (by county)](image)

Step 8: Follow-on Training
So far, an impressive 51 percent of Mercy Corps’ Prospects Apprenticeship Programme participants have been offered jobs, but of course not all will realistically be retained. Initial data shows that, while reasons for non-retention are to do with both business constraints and youth performances, the latter seems to be the more significant. Of 20 businesses which reported having not retained youth after the apprenticeship, the majority (11) cited lack of professionalism on the part of youth, particularly highlighting poor time management skills. This vindicates the pre-deployment training’s focus on work-readiness and soft skills, while emphasising that in some cases more effort is still needed to achieve the desired impacts.
Those who did not find employment with hosts are given the option to take advantage of a different service offered through Prospects’ Employment and Entrepreneurship (E&E) programme through Youth opportunities Centers. Even successfully retained apprentices are guided towards a training in Effective Job Applications, which supports participants to develop a CV, and provides guidance on interview skills, amongst other things.

3. Getting it right: Programme approaches and iterative adaptation

The Prospects’ apprenticeship programme in its current form is the outcome of a three years’ process of reflective iteration and adaptation. To illustrate, consider that Phase I of the Prospects programme included six different iterations in terms of structure, training, length, and financial and non-financial incentives, in addition to countless different administrative processes (see table below). These iterations sought to balance not only outcomes, but also efficiency and scalability. This section discusses key aspects of the programme, including outlining how learnings from practice have steered a process of iterative adaptation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days/week</th>
<th>Stipend (youth)</th>
<th>Stipend (business)</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Business Feedback</th>
<th>Monitor</th>
<th>Recruitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1 5</td>
<td>$3/day</td>
<td>$2/day</td>
<td>Business Skills</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Mercy Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2 5</td>
<td>$3/day</td>
<td>$60 + $2/day</td>
<td>Business Skills</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Twice / week</td>
<td>Shared at Mercy Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3 5</td>
<td>$3/day</td>
<td>$60 + $2/day</td>
<td>Business Skills</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Twice / week</td>
<td>Shared at Mercy Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>C4 6</td>
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<td>Matrix</td>
<td>Business Skills</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Spot-check</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Work readiness</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Spot-check</td>
<td>Shared at host</td>
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</table>

The Prospects experience shows that the extent to which apprenticeship programmes accurately identify, engage with and shape motivations and desired outcomes for participation, on the part of both apprentices and businesses, has critical bearings on the success of such programmes.

Responding to and shaping employers’ motivations and expectations

Businesses which participate in apprenticeship programmes are driven by the expectation of material returns for their businesses. While early models of the Prospects programme (as is common in Liberia) provided financial stipends or incentives to employers, this distorted motivations from the core objectives of the programme; businesses wanted to hire apprentices in order to earn money rather than to engage quality youth. The removal of stipends for businesses, and the re-framing of the programme towards a focus on the value of finding motivated and educated young staff, has positively impacted the degree to which employers are willing to invest in the programme in terms of providing quality training and mentorship, and retain staff in the long-term. It has obviously also resulted in cost savings. In a future phase of the programme, Mercy Corps intends to experiment with further transfer of responsibility towards businesses. For example, this could involve businesses paying a portion of apprentices’ stipend, or the full stipend for the final month.

The programme has repeatedly iterated to better service the needs of employers. This has included offering 6-day per week apprenticeships, changing the training schedule (from a weekly
schedule during deployment to pre-deployment) in order to reduce inconvenience, conducting interviews at host businesses, and conducting better outreach to youth in targeted locations to find youth with the right skills. In order to ensure that apprentices have the necessary soft skills valued by employers, another lesson learned from initial phases was that pre-deployment should focus on core employment skills such as customer service, ethics and etiquette, teamwork and communication.

Responding to and shaping youths’ motivations and expectations

The Prospects apprenticeship programme is demand-oriented – meaning that it is strongly embedded within an existing market structure that calls out staffing needs. To reduce entry barriers into labour markets, the programme seeks out employers first rather than apprentices. It is the demand-side signals that guide our recruitment, the number of jobs available in different sectors and the cycles and sizes of cohorts. This approach helps ensure that youths’ expectations of the possibility of retention has the potential to be realised.

Theoretical approaches such as career development theory emphasise employees’ commitment to self-improvement and learning. Nevertheless, in Liberia such commitment occurs in a broader context characterised by limited disposable income. Taking this in to consideration, Prospects’ apprentice payments structures have been shaped by the goal of ensuring the apprenticeship constitutes a beneficial alternative to other choices that youth may have, while at the same time not distracting motivation away from the programme’s career development goals. After a range of different stipend structures, a monthly rate of USD 70 was identified as optimal - slightly above an apprentice’s transportation and food costs, while not competing with the actual going rates of the employment market (while maintaining affordability at scale).

Young people have high expectations of employment in Liberia. While sometimes unrealistic, these expectations must be directly engaged with in the programme to ensure positive outcomes. Interestingly, in Phase I, exactly the same 51 percent of apprentices were offered jobs as is currently the case in Phase II, but only half of those job offers were accepted as the businesses were seen as too small or unappealing for long-term employment. Prospects has made great efforts to engage businesses seen as more appealing for employment (connected to the iterations in design to make it more appealing for such businesses, discussed above), resulting in a 100 percent job offer acceptance rate so far in Phase II.

The Prospects Apprenticeship Programme has sought to mirror young people’s experiences with the real-life employment market. Various efforts, from the application format, to interviews at the host businesses, timesheet and monthly reporting, and monthly stipend payments, have sought to provide the sorts of experiences which ensure that a transition to subsequent employment will not bring too many surprises.

Administration and scalability

The Prospects Apprenticeship Programme has consistently weighed up the content of its administrative systems with efficiency and scalability. This has involved consistently revising administrative systems to be less cumbersome, which had caused high workloads and delays. For example, initially the programme paid apprentices daily cash transfers of USD 3 rather than monthly stipends. This system caused a disincentive for honesty on the part of the apprentice,
The transition to a monthly stipend has significantly reduced workload without reducing attendance, reduced cases of dishonesty, and provided added benefit of encouraging cashflow management skills amongst apprentices. With a view to achieving sustainability, future iterations of the programme may involve exploring options for transitioning one or more of the various components (outreach, matching/shortlisting, monitoring) to public or private institutions.

The length of apprenticeships was experimented with, weighing cost effectiveness with impact. While many youth would prefer longer apprenticeships, the 51 percent job offer rate has shown that, in the Liberian context, the period is long enough to enough build trust to retain staff, while not being seen by businesses as too much of an up-front commitment or exposure to risk.

4. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to describe the methodology of Prospects’ apprenticeship programme. Beyond outlining the various sequential stages of the programme, it has aimed to practically illustrate how the intervention evolved and been refined in an iterative way through exposure to formal and informal learning processes.
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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.

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