

Mama Liberia

Understanding Non-health Factors Related to the Spread of HIV/AIDS women

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NPHIL
NATIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH
INSTITUTE OF LIBERIA

Monrovia, Liberia

Monrovia is the capital city of Liberia hosting over 1 million people, and just over 4.5 million people in the country. The country is peaceful and focused on social, economic, and political recovery as it works to rebuild from a civil war that took place from 1990-2003. In 2005 they elected Liberia's (and Africa's) first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Prior to the civil war Liberia, affectionally known as Mama Liberia, was one of the main entry points for international trade as it is located on the west coast of Africa bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Liberia has a long History with the United States as the American Colonization Society sent former slaves to the continent to establish the country in the early 19th century.

The National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL)

NPHIL's focus is on strengthening existing infection prevention and control for infectious diseases to ensure adequate public health safety within the entire country. They operate in all 15 counties within Liberia with their central headquarters in Monrovia. They meet weekly to provide updated information on disease numbers, spread, and containment within the country.

Advice

- **EXPLORE:** be open to different research, new places and non-profits that you may have not thought of. Your GIS instructor is there for a reason- to help guide you through the process
- **EMBRACE FLEXIBILITY:** Be open to your plans changing (during research, picking a country, and while in-country. You will be open to so many more possibilities and people than you could have planned for.

Research & Field Work:

The goal of the independent study was to learn about the infrastructure, personal, and influencing (non-health) factors related to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Liberia, specifically among women.

The project goals were to engage in exploratory research that would lead to a more focused research question (exploring possible PhD related research interests). NPHIL acted as my host site, connecting me with other non-governmental organizations (NGO) to do in person interviews and tours of facilities. The goal was to learn from practioners in the field and get a firsthand look at the available infrastructure and programs working to decrease and support women affected by HIV/AIDS.

Areas of research interest:

- Economic
- Political
- Social

Activities & Descriptions of places visited:

- JFK Hospital: largest government hospital
 - Infectious Disease Clinic
 - National Aids Control Program
- Health clinics
 - Duport Road Health Clinic
 - TB Annex
- United Methodist University School of Social Work
- Educate West Point – NGO in West Point (slum) that provides resources for children to attend local schools and an in-house preschool

Getting Started and narrowing your focus:

Everyone's GIS journey is different. Personally, I found a professor who's work I was interested in and contacted him via email after we met in person at an event (Dr. Gant). At our initial meeting, I shared some of my research interests (economics, health, and housing), and expressed interest in traveling to somewhere in Africa. He acted as a guide to narrow down the research focus and connected me with his contacts in Liberia (Dr. Fallah). My advice: Michigan has a lot of resources and connections, utilize thm, ask a lot of questions and remember that they are there to help guide your learning experience

Career Connections

My time in Liberia has drastically shifted my future career goals and opened doors to new people and places that I didn't imagine making connections with. This experience has helped me see the possibilities of international social work, social entrepreneurship and the importance of education. I have made connections with leading researchers in health fields, executives of non-profits, and community members actively working to uplift Liberia.

Skills Utilized/Developed

- **Engagement-** getting to know people and organizations means spending time with others and asking questions. It's important, especially as you enter a new community to build trust.
- **Flexibility-** your plans will change; you can get stressed or you can choose to enjoy the journey and be amazed by the things you could not have planned for.
- **Cultural Awareness** – you will be traveling to a new place that you are not accustomed to the culture, social norms, and etiquettes. Recognize your presence and ask questions so that you may be respectful to people, places, and culture.

Explore the possibilities

One of the most important lessons I've learned is to be open to new experiences and learning opportunities. This is an opportunity to explore things of interest to you and also topics and areas you may have not thought about. I changed my GIS country more than once as new opportunities arose, my research questions altered throughout the course of the year and I visited places in-country that were not originally on my itinerary. I learned a lot and met amazing people along the way!

This poster was created for the Fall 2014 Global Social Work Poster Fair



THANK YOU!

Thank you to those who have made this study opportunity possible!!

- Office of Global Activities
- SSW Alumni Board of Governors
- Dr. Larry Gant, GIS instructor
- Dr. Mosoka Fallah & the National Public Health Institute of Liberia, in-country host
- Mom & Dad, believing in me and my dreams wherever they may lead

