



Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives - NEPI **Sustainable Transformation for Youth in Liberia (STYL) Program**

NEPI BACKGROUND

Problem

Urban crime and violence is one of the most costly and divisive issues facing cities around the world. Countries in Latin America and Africa experienced an average of 24 and 10.9 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively – above the WHO threshold for endemic violence.¹ The cumulative cost of violence represents up to 10 percent of GDP in some countries.² However, this problem is not intractable: most urban violence is committed by a small number of young men in a small number of places.³ From Liberia to Chicago, research has shown it is possible to identify these men, change their mindsets and behaviors, and integrate them into society to create safer communities for everyone.

The Sustainable Transformation of Youth in Liberia (STYL) program—piloted in Liberia between 2009 and 2012—provides 8 weeks of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and cash grants to high-risk young men. A randomized evaluation found that the program reduced crime and violence by up to 50% over 10 years—at a cost of only \$2.50 per avoided crime. These results suggest that expanding access to the STYL program is a first-order priority for crime and violence reduction. Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives (NEPI), in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Global Development Incubator, and GiveDirectly, is now seeking funding to implement the STYL program in Liberia and to scale across sub-Saharan Africa.

STYL Program: Overview and Results to Date

The STYL program consists of identifying the highest-risk young men in a city and offering them an eight-week group CBT program focused on reducing reflexive violent behaviors, improving planning skills and future focus, and helping men adopt a more mainstream, noncriminal social identity. The program combines an eight-week course of group therapy – incorporating a mix of lectures, group discussions, role-playing, and practical homework exercises – with one-on-one counseling. This CBT curriculum is accompanied by an unconditional \$300 cash grant, which provides income support as the young men practice what they learn and focus on changing their lifestyles.

¹ “Urban Violence: A Challenge of Epidemic Proportions,” World Bank, September 6, 2016, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2016/09/06/urban-violence-a-challenge-of-epidemic-proportions>; “Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014,” World Health Organization, January 9, 2014, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564793>.

² “Urban Violence: A Challenge of Epidemic Proportions,” World Bank.

³ “What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle,” Democracy International, February 2016, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/USAID-2016-What-Works-in-Reducing-Community-Violence-Final-Report.pdf>

A randomized evaluation demonstrated that the STYL program reduced violent, criminal, and antisocial behavior by 0.25 standard deviations. Practically speaking, this means that self-reported drug selling and thefts fell by up to 50%. The reductions in crime and violence were greatest among the men who reported the highest levels of antisocial behavior at the beginning. The program also improved participants' mental health and some measures of self-control and self-image. Research completed this year—which located nearly 93% of surviving participants—shows that these results persist over a decade. The program is cost-effective, costing just \$530 per participant, translating into \$2.50 per avoided crime.

STYL Relaunch

We propose to relaunch the STYL program in Liberia to reach 2,500 participants in the highest-risk neighborhoods in Monrovia over three years. We will also strengthen NEPI's capacity to operate sustainably in Liberia, positioning NEPI to identify and enroll a new cohort of the highest-risk young men — the group for whom the program was most effective — every year. Contingent on funding, we may conduct an additional RCT to confirm that the program remains impactful for young Liberian men today. Research and evaluation components of this work will be supported by IPA, and cash grants will be delivered by GiveDirectly.

Long-Term Vision for Scale

In the long-term, we want to establish an ongoing program to engage thousands of participants in Liberia and other countries each year, reducing the incidence of violent crime across multiple major cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Alongside re-establishing the STYL program in Liberia, we will scope potential partners and geographies for further scale. Scaling beyond Liberia will entail NEPI providing technical assistance to grassroots organizations in other countries to implement the STYL program, including adapting the CBT curriculum for other languages and contexts. NEPI also intends to explore a partnership with the Ministry of Youth and Sports in Liberia, which, if successful, could serve as a test case for implementing the STYL program in collaboration with government partners in other contexts.

Decisions about how and where to replicate will be based on the program's evidence-backed theory of change, on our informed assumptions, and on what we learn from replicating in Liberia. As we scale into other contexts, the multidisciplinary research team will conduct additional randomized evaluations of those pilot programs. This research would seek to determine whether the results hold when the program is implemented in other contexts by other organizations, to identify which components are key to the program's success, and, more broadly, to further our understanding of the use of CBT combined with cash grants for crime and violence prevention.

Organizational Background

The Network for Empowerment & Progressive Initiatives (NEPI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization registered in New York, Michigan, and Liberia. NEPI is the original implementing organization of the STYL program. It has extensive knowledge of the target neighborhoods, connections to local leaders, facilitators with lived experience who can serve as role models, and

a strong reputation among community leaders and high-risk young men. Klubosumo Johnson Borh, a Social Entrepreneur and a Youth Empowerment Specialist, a 2021 Rainer Arnhold Fellow of the Mulago Foundation, and now a 2023 Youth Empowerment Fellow of The Agency Fund, is a founding member and the CEO of NEPI, and a key member of the team developing and adapting STYL over the past 10 years.

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy nonprofit that creates and shares evidence while equipping decision-makers to use evidence to reduce poverty. IPA—in partnership with the multidisciplinary research team of Chris Blattman, Sebastian Chaskel, Julian Jamison, and Margaret Sheridan— has conducted all of the research on the STYL project in the past decade. IPA will provide technical assistance to NEPI to conduct an intake survey of participants in Liberia and, along with researchers, will accompany NEPI along the scaling process as a learning partner. With a presence in seven countries in West Africa—including staff with knowledge of local contexts and relationships with key policymakers—IPA is well-positioned to support NEPI in scaling the STYL program in Liberia and replicating it across the region. IPA has significant experience in supporting organizations to scale evidence-based programs.

GiveDirectly (GD) is a non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to delivering unconditional cash transfers directly to people in poverty through mobile money platforms. In the last decade, GiveDirectly has delivered over \$700 million to 1.5 million people living in resource-poor contexts across 15 countries, including Liberia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Rwanda. GD's cost-effective, data-driven, and technology-enabled cash transfer models, which are equipped with efficient end-to-end operations, have positioned the organization as an influential player in the poverty-reduction sector and led to it being named the world's fastest-growing nonprofit in 2020. GD's programs have undergone 20 RCTs to build evidence and advocate for cash transfers as an effective intervention in both development and emergency contexts. GD has an established record of operational achievement delivering cash in remote and challenging contexts and has experience working with varied sub-population groups. GD has operated in Liberia since 2018, during which the organization has established strategic partnerships with various government line ministries, notably the ministries responsible for gender and social protection and youth in supporting national development priorities.

Global Development Incubator (GDI) is an incubator for transformational development ventures, working to build and scale the next generation of social impact solutions. GDI provides structured pathways over 2-3 years to support the achievement of critical step-changes necessary for ideas and organizations to move to the next level. Through its partnership with GDI, NEPI is preparing to scale and expand its impact across Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in post-conflict states where peace and stability are fragile. The partnership is focused on establishing the foundation for a regional violence prevention initiative that will scale CBT-based programming. GDI is providing 150K to support the regional scale-up efforts, specifically staffing and operational support.