



REDRESS

Reducing the burden of
Severe Stigmatising Skin Diseases

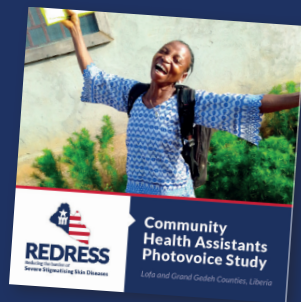
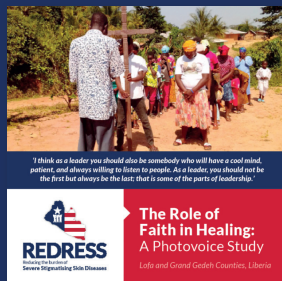
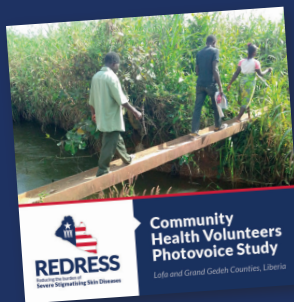
Traditional Healers Photovoice Study

Lofa and Grand Gedeh Counties, Liberia

Traditional Healers Photovoice Study

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) affect around one billion people globally, often the most poor and marginalised groups in society.

For many persons with severe stigmatising skin diseases (SSSDs) such as leprosy, buruli ulcer, yaws, onchocerciasis, hydrocele and lymphedema, lack of access to effective services results in significant physical, financial and psycho-social impacts. Delayed diagnosis and disease progression cause greater and largely irreversible physical impairment; and alternative treatment is sought from outside the health system, often with economic and social consequences for patients and their households. In-depth understanding of the role and treatments provided by community level providers, both formal (community health assistants [CHAs], community health volunteers [CHVs]) and informal (faith healers, traditional healers) are often lacking. In this project, we seek to understand the experiences of CHAs, CHVs, faith healers and traditional healers in providing care for persons affected by SSSDs through photovoice.



This booklet is one of a series of four, with one booklet created for each group of participants, incorporating findings across two counties (Lofa and Grand Gedeh) and presents the findings of the photovoice activity to identify core issues and themes. These photos will be presented in stakeholder meetings to inform the co-design and implementation of interventions to strengthen the provision of services for people affected by SSSDs at community level. We aim to show the unique role played by these community level providers in supporting people affected by SSSDs and identifying opportunities for earlier identification and initiation of treatment, along with options for the provision of more holistic care of people affected. From this point onwards we will refer to NTDs/SSSDs as skin diseases.



MINISTRY OF HEALTH
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effect:hope
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This project is led by REDRESS, a collaboration between the Liberia Ministry of Health, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), the University of Liberia-Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (UL-PIRE), Actions Transforming Lives (ACTS), Effect Hope, American Leprosy Mission- AIM Initiative, Queen Margaret University, and is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).



Photovoice Methods *and* Consent

Photovoice is a creative participatory method, which aims to empower participants to take ownership and be the storytellers of their own narratives.

Over the course of three weeks, these four groups of participants took photographs within their communities to capture their lived experiences in relation to their work, their interactions with their community and the health system, with a particular focus on skin diseases.

The process involved training of photovoice participants on the use of cameras and ethics of photography. Co-researchers were recruited as part of the core research team, which included people affected by and/or providing care for people affected by skin diseases who then supported and trained other people affected within their communities as photovoice participants to take photographs and articulate their meanings. The study took place in Lofa and Grand Gedeh Counties, within Liberia. These counties were selected to provide comparison between counties where integrated case management of NTDs has been introduced (Lofa County) and not yet introduced (Grand Gedeh County).



Glossary

Big Bag	<i>Liberian jargon to refer to Hydrocele</i>
Big Belleh	<i>Liberian jargon to refer to a pregnant woman</i>
Big Foot	<i>Liberian jargon to refer to Lymphedema</i>
Black Baggers	<i>Informal service providers who sell medication and treat sick people within the communities</i>
Community Health Assistants (CHAs)	<i>Health workers not employed by the formal health system. They work outside of a 5km radius to health facilities and are trained frequently to treat common illnesses at community level</i>
Community Health Services Supervisor (CHSS)	<i>Has undertaken a 3-month period of training and supervises CHAs/CHVs at community level</i>
Community Health Volunteers (CHVs)	<i>Work within communities that are located within a 5km radius to health facilities to support the delivery of health services on an adhoc basis</i>
Everlasting Sore	<i>Liberian jargon to refer to Buruli Ulcer</i>
general Community Health Volunteers (gCHVs)	<i>Some CHAs were formerly referred to as gCHVs</i>
Grand Gedeh County	<i>One of Liberia's 15 counties located in the South-East and the second largest county. One of 10 counties that is not implementing MoH integrated case management plan</i>

Lofa County	<i>One of Liberia's 15 counties located in the North and the fourth largest county. One of the five counties implementing case management plans</i>
Mid Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC)	<i>Measurement to detect acute malnutrition</i>
Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs)	<i>Disabling or debilitating diseases that usually affect poorer populations in tropical and sub-tropical countries</i>
Open Mole	<i>Refers to migraine headache and is often used to describe mental distress</i>
Papay	<i>An older male</i>
Severe Stigmatising Skin Diseases (SSSDs)	<i>Diseases that affect the skin and are associated with negative attitudes or discrimination</i>
Tablet People	<i>Also referred to as black baggers</i>
University of Liberia-Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation Africa Center (UL-PIRE)	<i>A research center and one of REDRESS' collaborating partners</i>
Zoe	<i>Traditional spiritual personnel believed to possess supernatural powers to curse people and heal diseases</i>





Behind *the* Lens



"I am **Kumba Edwin**. I was 19 years old when I began as a herbalist...I feel happy about the job that I do. Right now, I am happy that I am healing people who are coming to me with different, different conditions. Some of the conditions are stomach problems, open-mole, that I healed very often. When somebody comes with leprosy, big-foot, everlasting sore [skin diseases], and stomach problem I have different, different leaves for them. I picked the leaves from the bush... I have different cups that I put them in. So, when it comes to anything like leprosy, I have medicine for it, and if you come for medicine for everlasting sore, I have medicine for it."

"I am **Aaron Armah**. I am serving as Culture Inspector in Lofa County. I am a herbalist, and I was born with this job. And I have been recognized by the government, the government has issued me a document, certificate, an ID card that, yes indeed, I am an herbalist within Liberia and out of Liberia. I was very young when I started this job, so, therefore I remain young and holding big position. I was about 12 to 13 years old when I started this traditional work. I learned from my father; my father is a big herbalist. My motivation to do this job because I was born with it. God sends me to save lives and to heal people. So, this really makes me happy. I have no doubt about doing it... It is my job; it is my obligation until the day God calls me. I am there to save a life through healing."





*"I am **Nyumah Ngesaconyah**. I have been doing the traditional work for almost 40 years helping people with different, different problems. I can't name them all because I can't remember them all...My father was a zoe [traditional healer chief] in Lofa county. I came around my father, so it was when I started this work. The thing that makes me happy to work because my father was a zoe...So, I want to tell you people thank you."*

*"My name **Sam Benedict**. I started my traditional work in 2006 when I obtained my document from the Ministry of Internal Affairs. I am from Ngaihema, Kolahun District. This traditional work is a gift. I have healed more than 30 persons since I started my job. A certain time came I left it, but I came back to the job because this is my own of area."*



*"**Jean Mareie** is my name. I joined the traditional [work] since 1982. Since I joined the traditional 1982, my everything is traditional. My father is doing the same traditional work in Ivory Coast... I make medicine for people who do not eat, bigfoot, rheumatism, poison, big stomach, foot break and free somebody from witch... Even when the person is in the United States, you can be there and I work for you and [put] you better in the state."*



“Alfred Togba is my name. I always tell people say this medicine that we doing is from my father days... We have mountain there, normal days when you don't have child and you go there they give you child. It is there right now. The people who are using it some of them have died. So, the medicine our fathers are doing that's what we follow behind and are doing. We didn't go and borrow it from different place, no.”

“Prince Gwion is my name. The work I am doing is from my grandfather [and the] work he was doing. My grand father passed way and the old thing I took it and put it on me. ... all my brother them said this thing here is demonic work. I am here and knocking my chest [boastfully or proudly] and saying demonic people will not go heaven, then I will not go to heaven but if I healed somebody that hundred blessings to God.”





Role of Traditional Healers

Traditional healers emphasised that their role is not just about going in the bush and picking leaves. This theme highlights roles as referring patients, doing deliverance, training the younger people to become herbalists and settling disputes among people. There are leaders within the herbalist group; the culture inspector, culture coordinator, chairman, and chief zoe. The cultural inspector settles conflict or tries to resolve problems. Traditional healers also refer patients to the hospital for further treatment if their condition do not present with traditional signs. The role also includes conducting traditional deliverance to remove witch spirits from people.

"Everything we do [as] the herbalist, we got people under us we are training... like this man and I live closer, and I am training him... this guy you are seeing is with me presently in Bolahun... The district authority came together [and decided] that they should give him to me so that he can be under [my teaching] to learn... This, morning we had a patient ...I was not able to go there so, the best thing I did was to send him there and to show the leaves to him so that he can go and see the patient. So, this why I was showing him the leaves, that is why the photo is there for."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County





"In this photo is a student...I was healing some people and two persons were brought to me for treatment, and later on, they asked me to train them in being a herbalist or to learn to be a herbalist... Now they are under me but this man does almost everything that I am capable of doing. This one is the student."

Kumba Edwin, Lofa County

"I served as culture inspector for Lofa... when it comes to religious issues... sometimes you see the traditional people and the Christians are hauling and pulling...I, being the culture inspector, was asked by the chairman to go to the court to withdraw the case to see how best we could solve the issue outside of the court. We realised that if the case was going to go higher to be settled by the court it was going to be very serious misunderstanding and confusion between the Christians and the traditional people, so we never wanted that..."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County





"This guy has some traditional problems before and I can always help them because every time it grabs him they bring him to me. I was on my farm brushing and I was told that they brought a patient to my place. I left, went home and I saw his condition, and then I realised that his problem was not a traditional problem. After I looked at it for a while then I took him to the hospital...he did not come with a caretaker; I took him to the hospital, and then they started to give him drips [intravenous infusions]. I was with him until he was discharged and then I brought him back to my place for treatment until he got well."

Sam Benedict, Lofa County



Traditional Healers *Role in the Community*

The theme identified roles that traditional healers play in the community. For example, taking self-initiative to build toilets for patients and making farms mainly to support patients who go for treatment and do not have any means of feeding. It was observed that community dwellers beat rice and cut palm as a means of survival. Means of transportation was discussed as a challenge by the community. However, one community dweller has a motor bike that is used as a means of survival as he transports goods and patients to the health facility.

"This is my farm, swamp...we herbalists are not on payroll; we are not on salary. Everything we do is by the grace of God because God gave us the wisdom, he gave us the ideas. I made this farm mainly for my patients; people that have got problems... sometimes they will come and they don't have the support, they don't have the means but rather we the herbalist we have the full responsibility to pay attention to them, to treat them and to feed them. If they don't have the means of feeding themselves we will have to feed them. So this farm that I have made here I used the rice of it to feed my patients because if I don't do that that my responsibility will increase, so, like I said, I took this picture so that you people know that we herbalists have some responsibilities."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County





"From this photo, we the herbalist everything about us we are still trying. I took this photo mainly for the people to see how we herbalists...we try our possible best. This is the bathroom because if some patients come they will need an area."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County



"His two motorbikes, first people was catching hard times to carry them to the hospital. So, now when people sick, they can use it to carry them to the hospital."

Prince Gwion, Grand Gedeh County



"Before you do anything country medicine and what have you, you have to wash your hands; you have to take a bath and anything that you do with the leaves for the person to use you should use clean water, and I think that is the water that the woman is fetching."

Nyumah Ngesaconyah, Lofa County

"That's the same palm this man cutting. That man who cutting that palm there, he's suffering, that's the reason he's cutting the palm so he will sell it. He's not working, he's not going to school; this man hasn't reach 20 years yet, but he has nobody to put him to school. So, he's cutting the palm to help himself."

**Alfred Togba,
Grand Gedeh County**



"Woman that beating the rice down there, she don't have husband. It was on Friday we were passing and then the woman was beating rice, I say oh the woman, this situation it can disturb people oh. Then the little child said oh I am hungry, I want for my mother to give me rice quick so I can eat oh. I said oh Ma the way you are beating rice now, I am able to take your picture, they said yes. I said but your daughter said she wants to eat rice. That's how I took the picture."

**Seya Jean Mareie,
Grand Gedeh County**





Traditional Treatments, Skin Disease *and* Chronic Ill Health

The traditional healers expressed that diseases can lead to death and God has given them power to heal with leaves. According to their ability to heal they can provide treatment for people affected by skin disease and other neglected or chronic health issues like snake bite, malaria, typhoid, miscarriages and people suffering from stomach problems. The provision of treatment is a means of survival for them. There are processes the herbalist goes through to prepare the treatment. E.g. Herbalists must look for leaves and prepare them before administering them to the patient. It is advisable to use clean water when preparing treatment.



"Yes, this is the patient that was coming and crying. This shows to you that we treat the patient for snake bites and that we can cure the poison. I was sitting down, and this old mom came crying; she was bitten by a snake on her hand in the bush and somebody called me, and I met with her in the town. This is the hand that was bitten; I went in the bush, and I fixed the medicine, and this is the medicine I was coming back with from in the bush. She is now well; everything is fine with her."

Nyumah Ngesaconyah, Lofa County

"The same medicine he's doing it, he has children to send to school. So, that's the medicine he go pick in the bush here. So, that's all the man's life you are seeing down there. His future. That man who cutting the medicine down there, that's his own of thing God give him to make his living. The same leaf the papay (older man) cutting there, that's the same leaf we can cut too to go and help ourselves too."

Alfred Togba, Grand Gedeh County



"In this photo, there are bits in this cup and they can be used to cure many sicknesses, like malaria, thyroid, and all those things. There was a woman coming and was suffering from stomach pains, I met her and then I went in the bush to get these leaves and I took it, washed it fine, put it in the cup mashed it, and after mashing it I sifted it and when it got warm the patient drank it and she got cured."

Kumba Edwin, Lofa County

"When the person cure that happiness, I do things to get good result tomorrow. That's why I took the picture...When she get in his hands, God empower him to work on the woman. So, I make him happy, for that reason he has the woman photo."

Seya Jean Mareie, Grand Gedeh County





"This woman says each time she gets pregnant she will experience miscarriages sometimes during her eighth month of pregnancy or ninth month she will experience this. The pregnancy before this one she had a twin but during delivery, the children did not survive. So after she got this pregnancy during the second month her parents brought her to me because I most of the time treat patients with such conditions, and it is the country medicine that I treat my patient with until they give birth. This is the reason my namesake is plenty because sometimes when I do this work and my patient gives birth they name the child after me; for now I have 11 namesakes. I am treating this pregnant woman to deliver safely tomorrow so that this child can survive, so this is the treatment I am now carrying on."

Sam Benedict, Lofa County



“As I was saying here as a herbalist...any herbalist sometimes when you have a patient and the patient coming each time they come for treatment there should be a caretaker. You see here this pregnant woman went to the waterside because we give her advice that whenever we are giving medicine out, mainly for drinking, it should be clean water, clean water. So I send her for the water and she brought it for her treatment.”

Sam Benedict, Lofa County



Reliance on Traditional Forms of Healing

Traditional healers took photographs to show that many of their patients were affected by skin diseases, including big foot, and everlasting sore. Patients had sought care from the health facility, but their condition had gotten worse instead of decreasing as the health facility didn't know what treatment to provide. Patients had come to herbalists as a result of this and traditional medicines provided to help the patient, which healers described as working well. Reliance on traditional healers was also particularly important where participants felt the quality of care provided at the health facility was poor.



“ We have an everlasting sore (skin disease)...they took him all over for treatment and they couldn't get an idea [of what was wrong] so they said I think there is a need we call the herbalist...they went to hospitals all over to no way [no improvement]. Instead of the problem decrease but rather the problem was increasing so they decided to take him to a herbalist to get treatment and that was when they brought him to me and I started the treatment...he came for his last treatment, the sore is getting well now”.

Aaron Armah, Lofa County

“In this photo is a girl with some kind of headache problem. She has an open-mole. I was treating the open-mole until after the sore got cure that was why I started washing her hair; however, she is now recovering and is on her last treatment and from there she will go back to her home.”

Sam Benedict, Lofa County





"The woman in this photo is one of my patients...they met with the woman with her foot very big...I started the treatment her foot started to heal. She walked to the hospital and they continued to give her injections, but while giving the injections the problem became to increase instead of it getting to decrease, so it was when I started the country treatment that it decreased. As of now, at the time you people came there were no sore on the foot, but now sores are appearing behind her foot. By the grace of God, I have gone through the treatment with her and she is all right now; this is why I took the photo."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County



"We treat sores - I met my friend who was treating this ... woman with this sore. This sore has been with this woman for seven years and there was no better treatment so they had to take her to this herbalist...This is to tell us that if the hospital is unable, the country doctors are able..."

Nyumah Ngesaconyah, Lofa County

"There is a fellow sitting here and we have some leaves in our hands...Some sickness come and when you go to the hospital they will do their own [treatment] but there is no improvement they will rather have to turn to the country doctor. This person couldn't even walk his foot had a problem and we found out that it was an African science. This photo actually made me happy because to see my patient walking, sitting down comfortably, and healthy, I felt somehow happy about it, so this is one of the healing."

Aaron Armah, Lofa County



"This old woman has been sick for so many years; I can say up to five years I have been seeing her sick...they took her to the hospital, but her sickness continued to increase, so it was when her children come to me to find out whether the problem was a traditional problem...they hang drips [intravenous infusions] on her more than 50 times but there was no improvement so that how they took her to my place, and I have been treating her...the woman has already recovered."

Sam Benedict, Lofa County



Norms of Traditional Healing

The theme highlighted some norms for traditional healing, sacrifices and location of treatment. These norms govern traditional healers. As a way of sacrifice, traditional healers request chicken, sheep or cattle for healing. Those items are not compulsory if they are not available to patients but are preferred by healers. Traditional healers indicated that a white flag is used as a symbol to locate them in the community. This indicates that they are certified traditional healers.

"This photo gives the location of where I lived; this is my house in Kpadoni. Maybe sometimes the patients they will be taken to the hospital and the hospital won't be able to cure the patient and they will be finding means to see me. And as soon as they reach my place, and they see the white cloth hanging over it they will know that I am there already. That is the herbalist sign; that is the flag."

Kumba Edwin, Lofa County





"He can say bring the chicken. When somebody sick, for example like the way this foot looking now before you start the medicine, he can say bring chicken before he start your medicine.

When he doing somebody medicine, you can bring chicken, when you get big problem behind you, he can tell you to bring chicken to free you. So, that's tradition."

Seya Jean Mareie, Grand Gedeh County



"The other one, that tree there, that where the witchcraft them can enter in to kill people. It's the tree we cut down there, that's the blood there you are seeing so. The blood moving from in the tree and wasting. When you finished working, then you can stand, so people can see you to say oh let the man there."

Prince Gwion, Grand Gedeh County



“If you come for us to heal you, you will bring that sheep. And these traditional sacrifice, or cattle or chicken that people give your either to conduct sacrifice or to give it as gift. If you come for us to heal you, you will bring that chicken and the sheep...that white cloth that [you] see behind, when we enter inside, you will hear voice like man devil talking behind. Anything it calls for that we will bring...when they say bring sheep, that it you will bring.”

Seya Jean Mareie, Grand Gedeh County



Recommendations of Actions for Change *from traditional healers*

Traditional healers emphasised that patients may come to stay in their own home during treatment, or they may need to refer a patient to the hospital for care. They highlighted the need for materials to help with providing care at home, such as cooking pots, a place for patients to stay within the home, while others highlighted the need for gloves as personal protective equipment.

“For me, if I have such a patient what will make me get encouraged to really work for the person, sometimes when you are coming and you come with some equipment that I will need, like a pot. Sometimes some patients you will have to heat them and then you got to look for pots. Sometimes you even take a drinking cup and from there the heating cloth; if all of those things are available I will get encouraged to get your medicine... So these are some of the things really that we need ... and sometimes the patient come and they need food we will need to feed them, so all of those things are on our heads, it is a burden on us because the government is not paying us and everything.”

Lofa Traditional Healer Discussion

“When they come to us [for] healing, they can live where we live and then they and us can sleep until they can better before they go. Because, you not just see somebody and say hold medicine and take it to your place. You don't know what will happen there. So the person can be with you. Like for example, you carry somebody to the hospital and then they say carry this medicine [to] the house and let the person be taking it, no. Let the person be to that hospital and let them get well before they will go home.”

Grand Gedeh Traditional Healer Discussion



Reflections on the Photovoice Process *from traditional healers*

Traditional healers highlighted the hope that the photos they have taken can be used to raise awareness and to advocate for more support to help those who are affected by skin diseases. Some co-researchers also commented on the skills they had gained to take photos and to identify skin diseases within their communities.



“It was something that cut my heart that’s what enthused me to take that picture; for example, people are coming to us for healing. When you come for healing, the other person with the big foot (skin disease), when you come for treatment, I take the picture. When you with sickness I will take the picture. ...And some of those them that suffering when you take their [photo] and some people see them maybe some of them will like to help.”

“But when you don’t have nothing then that picture he will carry. He said those who picture we taking one, our own of help them we able to help them and health them; but some diseases there too is hard, when you finished doing it sometimes it be hard. So, you’re the government people too so your can help them in the process. So, when you see the picture so you can be convince because they say seeing is believing. So, without the picture if I want go down there, if I see this person and I said I want go treat the person maybe I will be a [perceived a] liar for the job I am doing.”

Grand Gedeh Traditional Healer Discussion

“I did not know how to use a phone but you people made me to use a phone and how to take pictures; I was so happy about the idea... Yes, to show that this is the time for us to be going around knowing the people that are sick in our community to help them.”

Lofa Traditional Healer Discussion

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