

Images of African Informal Settlements: Exploring Contested Experiences of Place, Gender, and  
Development in West Point, Liberia

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of B.A Joint Honours in Geography and Political Science

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April 2012

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research and writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the efforts of the following individuals:

My supervisor in the Department of Geography at McGill University, Dr. Nancy Ross: thank you for your helpful edits and comments on drafts and for your continuous guidance and support throughout the research and writing process.

My research methods professor and thesis reader, Dr. Sarah Turner: thank you for taking the time to read and evaluate this thesis and for helping me to become a more rigorous and reflexive researcher.

My family and friends in Canada: thank you for all of the love and support you provided while I was in Liberia and back home, for allowing me to talk about my research (and for listening with open ears), and for motivating me to see this project through to the end. A special thank you goes to my friend James Di Paolo for his cartography assistance.

Boakai Vafoley and my friends and colleagues in Liberia: thank you for your insights, enthusiasm, help, and suggestions. Your thoughts have invaluable shaped the ideas on these pages.

The McCall MacBain Foundation: thank you for inspiring me with your model of philanthropy, for encouraging me to investigate my interests, and for providing the financial support that made this research and my experience in Liberia possible.

Most importantly, to my facilitator from West Point, Jacob, and to all the people in West Point who welcomed me into their community and allowed me to spend time with them,

My sincerest thanks.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this thesis is to address the knowledge gap about community planning and development in a Liberian informal settlement community called West Point. Through a comparison of resident perceptions of their community and Liberian state perceptions, this thesis seeks to highlight the importance of engaging in a deeper level of inquiry with the residents of informal settlements in order to develop sustainable and appropriate solutions to community problems. The thesis also details differences in the lived experiences of women and men in West Point, and explains how common external perceptions of slum communities mask problems of gender relations in informal settlements. It uses in-depth semi structured interviews with residents of West Point and Liberian government officials to demonstrate how an improved understanding of the livelihood patterns and priorities of residents could positively influence the way the Liberian national and municipal governments and development organizations respond to community challenges.

“I have always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person...The consequence of the single story is this: it robs people of their dignity. It makes the recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different, rather than how we are similar.”- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of A Single Story*

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Liberia, a small coastal country in West Africa with a population of 3.3 million people, is home to the community of West Point, situated in the capital city, Monrovia. West Point is characterized as a slum. From the outside it appears dirty, dangerous and difficult to get around in. However, to the local residents, there is a distinct order and rationality to the way the settlement is structured. Discourses of need are dominant within the academic and development literature about informal settlements<sup>1</sup> and these discussions are undeniably important; there are obvious and immediate needs in West Point, including an absence of adequate sanitation facilities, elevated crime rates, frequent outbreaks of cholera and malaria, too many children and too few schools, to name only a few. However, what is often left undisclosed are the community dynamics that help to explain the way slum communities' function. It is necessary to hear the voices of the residents, to listen to individual stories, and to learn about how West Point shapes and is shaped by everyday life and livelihood patterns. Individual agency, community history, and progress are masked by depictions that do not extend beyond images of the dilapidated, disorganized, violent slum. The singular image of the sprawling, crime-ridden slum also hides differences in the lived experiences of women and men, and aspects of daily life that are oppressive to many women and girls. These misconceptions and failed understandings impact the way national and municipal governments interact with a place and respond to community challenges.

### **1.1: Thesis Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to add to the limited body of academic and development literature about Liberian slum communities and to address the knowledge gap about community planning and development in West Point. There is currently very little academic information available about

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<sup>1</sup> See Staples, J. (2007); Stephens, C. (1991); Chaplin, S (1999); United Nations Human Settlements (2003); McFarlane, C. (2008). Huchzermeyer, M., and Karam, A. (2006).

informal settlements in Liberia since the end of the Liberian civil war in 2003. The questions to be explored in this thesis are:

- How do West Point residents view their community? Do these views differ from Liberian state views of informal settlements?
- How do the lived experiences of women and men differ in West Point? How do common external perceptions of slum communities mask problems of gender relations within West Point?
- Could an improved understanding of the livelihood patterns and priorities of West Point residents influence the way the Liberian government and development organizations respond to this community's challenges?

In order to answer these questions, this thesis draws on in-depth interviews with residents of West Point and national and municipal government officials to gain an improved understanding of the different perceptions of slum settlements in urban Liberia. In addition, it will analyze the policies of Liberian government officials towards informal settlement communities. I will argue that sustainable community development<sup>2</sup> will require that Liberian municipal and national governments first take into account user needs and priorities when deciding how to allocate scarce public resources. State initiatives that emphasize relocation and clearance as a means for achieving an ideal urban landscape for Monrovia will be unsuccessful unless the state begins to address the immediate needs of slum residents and considers how these needs and resident priorities for their own communities can be met as part of Liberia's broader urban development goals

## **1.2: Situating the Research**

Widespread urbanization in Liberia beginning in the 1980s accelerated during the civil war (1989-2003). The civil war was a tumultuous time for Liberia, causing the deaths of a quarter of a million people and vast infrastructural destruction, co-occurring with the tripling of Monrovia's population.<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that the majority of Liberians living in Monrovia now live in informal settlements or in households that would formally be classified by the UN and World Bank as

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<sup>2</sup> Sustainable development is described by the UN High Level Panel on Global Sustainability to be "a dynamic process of adaptation, learning and action. It is about recognising, understanding and acting on interconnections—above all those between the economy, society and the natural environment". See UN High Level Panel on Global Sustainability. (30 January 2012). *Resilient People: Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing*. Addis Ababa.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, C. Rhodri. (2011). "Beyond Squatters' Rights: Durable Solutions And Development-Induced Displacement In Monrovia, Liberia." The Norwegian Refugee Council. 5.

slum households.<sup>4</sup> The UN-HABITAT specifies that a slum household is a household that lacks any one or more of the following five elements: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing, sufficient living area.<sup>5</sup>

The case study for this project is an informal settlement called West Point, which is situated on a peninsula jutting out between the Mesurado River and the Atlantic Ocean. This publically owned piece of land is home to between 60,000 and 80,000 people. During the Liberian civil war, West Point was considered to be a place of refuge as people fled from the interior of the country and other areas of Monrovia to seek shelter in the one way access area of West Point. Since the war, many of the internally displaced people have remained in the community. Like many communities in Liberia, West Point lacks access to electricity, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, accessible and affordable healthcare and education facilities, and suffers from high rates of crime. Yet the agency, initiative, reciprocity and entrepreneurial spirit of *West Pointers* has made the community a viable and in this sense, a desirable, place to live for decades.



**Figure 1.1: Map of Liberia, Source: GlobalGIS**

### 1.3: Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 will develop the theoretical framework that this project will use to analyze community ideas of place and development. It draws on three broad bodies of literature, first: geographic concepts of place and location, second: community planning and development as it relates to informal settlements as well as the nature of asset accumulation in slum settlements, and lastly: African state policies toward slum communities. The conceptual framework for this thesis begins with exploring common perceptions of informal settlements. Some of the most frequently seen images of Africa are of its slums—sprawling tin roofs, dirt roads, chaos and condensed poverty. There is a tendency to associate slums with their problems: crime, HIV/AIDS, pollution, while

<sup>4</sup> UN-HABITAT, “Monrovia’s Urban Sector Profile”. 6. Furthermore, the proportion of urban residents in Africa living in slums is 72%. Baker, Judy. (2008). “Urban Poverty: A Global View”, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/ The World Bank. [www.worldbank.org/urban](http://www.worldbank.org/urban). 5.

<sup>5</sup> UN-HABITAT.(2003).“Chapter 1: Development Context and the Millennium Agenda” in *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements*. 16.



advocating for solutions to these problems. These depictions, which have the effect of ordering our understanding of the world, become the overarching representations that guide our perceptions, expectations and reactions to a place. In the conceptual framework, I will also define the concepts of community planning and urban policy that this thesis will draw upon and explain how governments at the municipal and national levels are focussing their efforts on broader aspirations for Monrovia, while devoting little attention to the immediate problems faced by the West Point community.

In Chapter 3, I will provide a brief introduction to Liberia and a historical overview of West Point. In the methodology chapter, Chapter 4, I will describe in detail the research methods used during two months of field research in Liberia. These methods include participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Chapter 5 delves into the first part of the analysis, examining resident experiences of West Point. The chapter divides resident experiences in West Point into “the physical space” and “the changing place.” Chapter 6, entitled “Power and Place: The Government and West Point,” will explore municipal and national community planning tactics, governance challenges and the road ahead for West Point. Finally, in Chapter 7, I will offer conclusions and recommendations for future research and inquiry.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The objective of this thesis is to gain an improved understanding of a particular informal settlement community in Liberia through a comparison of resident views of their community and Liberian state views in order to better understand how these differing perceptions influence community planning and development activities. It is difficult to identify a defined literature that speaks directly to these objectives. In the geographic community, there are bodies of research such as informal economy and livelihoods literature that concentrate on explaining the nature and growth of informal economic activity in developing urban areas. Keith Hart first coined the term “informal” when he wrote about the distinction between formal and informal income opportunities in Ghana. He specified that the difference is loosely based on the classification of an activity as either wage earning or self employment, but noted that this differentiation is not absolute.<sup>6</sup> Informal economic activities encompass a “wide-ranging scale, from marginal operations to large enterprises”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Hernando DeSoto and Terry McGee, among many others, have written extensively about the interplay between informal and formal economies, urbanization and urban poverty, and political approaches to dealing with the growth of informal economic activity in developing countries.<sup>8</sup>

Although much of this research is pertinent to West Point, I am interested in understanding the lived experiences of residents as their community faces transition. These experiences go beyond economic and livelihood practices, to resident perceptions of their urban surroundings and prospects and priorities for the community’s future. The conceptual framework that follows first defines the geographic concepts of location, space and place and then draws on three broad bodies of literature: common perceptions of African informal settlements, community planning and development as it relates to informal settlements as well as the nature of asset accumulation in slum settlements, and lastly, African state policies toward slum communities.

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<sup>6</sup>Hart, K. (1973). Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11(1), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>De Soto, H., & Instituto Libertad y, D. (1989); Armstrong, W., & McGee, T. G. (1985); Ginsburg, N. S., Koppel, B., McGee, T. G., East-West, E., & Policy, I. (1991); Mazumdar, D. (1976); Boeke, J. H. (1953); Yankson, P. W. (2000).

## 2.1: Defining Place

It is first necessary to define the concepts of location, space, and place that this thesis will draw upon. Place and location differ in ways that have significant implications for the ways in which humans experience and interact with their environment. Location can be thought of as an absolute concept; it is nominal or expressed solely in terms of the names and physical characteristics given to regions or places.<sup>9</sup> It is an absolute concept because a location is fixed and does not describe the association between people and their physical locations. In contrast, the term space incorporates the association between people and locations; for instance, cognitive space is defined and measured in terms of the nature and degree of people's values, feelings, beliefs, and perceptions about locations, districts and regions.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, place encompasses a broader understanding of the meaning associated with a physical location. A "self conscious sense of place" refers to the feelings evoked among people as a result of the experiences, memories and symbolism that they associate with a given place.<sup>11</sup> It can also refer to the character of a place as seen by outsiders—its unique or distinctive physical characteristics. Often, sense of place for insiders is a natural outcome of people's familiarity with one another and their surroundings. Because of this consequent sense of place, people feel at home and "in place."<sup>12</sup> There is also the idea of place being a mental image through which people draw on personality and culture to produce cognitive images of their environment, pictures or representations of the world that can be called to mind through the imagination. Using this notion of place, it is easy to understand how the meanings of places and the images people have of them can differ on so many levels. Informality in the context of "informal settlements" will refer to Laguerre's definition, understood as a reality "not totally separated from the formal system, but rather linked to and shaped by it. Informality is a structure of action that contains both harmonious (adaptation) and contradictory (resistance) relationships. It is a site of power in relation to external disciplinary and control power."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Knox, Paul L, Sallie A. Marston, Alan E. Nash, and Paul L. Knox (2004). *Human Geography: Places and Regions in Global Context*. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 276.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>13</sup> Laguerre, M. S. (1994). *The informal City*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2.

### *2.1.1: The Deteriorating Space: Common Images of Informal Settlements*

"One glimpse is enough. You have discovered the famous misery of the Third World. A sea of homes made from earth and sticks rising from primeval mud-puddle streets"<sup>14</sup>

Images of the African city remain focused around a discourse of urbanization, modernization and crisis.<sup>15</sup> African slums, in particular, are the dominant image that comes to mind when one thinks of urban Africa. Mike Davis's book, *Planet of Slums* is a foremost example of Western portrayals of African informal settlements. The critical praise the book received, with comments such as "a terrifying, magisterial work," "the astonishing facts hit like anvil blows...a heartbreaking book" and "Davis's description of the conditions the slum dwellers endure provide reason enough to read this book" indicates from the outset that Davis's portrayal of slums corresponds to what readers are expecting to find: a story of overwhelming poverty and suffering. The book was intended for a mainstream audience and reaffirms the public perception of informal settlements through Davis's continuous use of language that depicts them as being sprawling, disorderly, dirty, crime-ridden, "dangerously dilapidated" and "massively overcrowded."<sup>16</sup> The author's language is clearly used to instill a sense of urgency and fear in the reader, suggesting that slums are a global "apocalypse" waiting to happen. Davis rarely ventures beyond descriptions of the physical conditions of slums and the political and economic structural elements that seem to perpetuate their existence. A myriad of compressed facts, combined with the author's tendency to jump from country to country every few sentences creates the impression that there is very little diversity between informal settlements and that the problems they experience are essentially universal. Davis describes what he predicts to be the future of the city:

Cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay.<sup>17</sup>

The urban vision the author is expressing rests on a very singular conception of modernity, in the form of the common Western notion of city: glass, steel and skyscrapers. This version of the

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<sup>14</sup> Neuwirth, R. (2005). *Shadow cities: A billion squatters, a new urban world*. New York: Routledge, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Achilles Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2004). "Writing the World from an African Metropolis". *Public Culture* 16(3), 352.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, M. (2006). *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso, 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

future city is associated with positive images of light and heaven, whereas the alternative he describes is one of deterioration and decline, of “pollution, excrement and decay.” This corresponds to a common conception of slums as being site of stagnation, where little changes and no progress is made. He goes on to say that inhabitants of postmodern slums “might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Catal Huyuk in Antolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years ago.”<sup>18</sup> Davis is not only implying that informal settlements do not correspond to a modern image of the city or any notion of progress, but he refers to them as being less advanced than the origins of the first city. In this way, Davis completely negates any social, cultural or aesthetic value that may be associated with slums and reinforces a singular understanding of urbanism.

Notions of order and representation underlie some of the most common depictions of African informal settlements. The relationship between people and objects in the West has come to be equated with real experiences with the environment.<sup>19</sup> Urbanism in North America is consequently defined by commoditization and material surroundings. The West’s tendency towards urban order became “at once so realistic and so extensive that no one ever realized that the real world they promised was not there.”<sup>20</sup> A dwelling in an informal settlement in Africa is the product of people’s lives; it is formed by the individuals’ efforts and ingenuity and reflects their own situation, however they may define it. The world in this sense is not created by some external force or method of categorization, but is the “pure form of the novel kind of reality to which the world-as-exhibition gives rise.”<sup>21</sup> The techniques that Western planners have used to order urban spaces have been extended to informal settlements through development and planning projects, despite the fact that informal settlements are not arranged according to the same categorization as Western cities.<sup>22</sup> Failure to appropriately contextualize policies has led to the creation of unrealistic and ineffective policy solutions in urban Africa.<sup>23</sup> Formal ideas of property and ownership have come to be incorporated in the definition of place. The absence of plan, permanency and choice associated with the way informal settlements are designed

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, Timothy. (1992). “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order.” in *Colonialism and Culture. Colonialism and culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.295.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Okpala, Don (1987). “Received Concepts and Theories in African Urbanization Studies”, 138.

<sup>23</sup> Odendaal, Nancy (2011). “Reality Check: Planning Education in the African Urban Century.” *Cities*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2011.10.00>.

eliminates the possibility of them being considered places by outsiders; they instead remain purely locations of need. This stark dichotomy between the formal and informal, permanency and impermanency is something that permeates depictions of informal settlements in Africa. Moreover, slums are often represented as places apart from the broader economic, social, and cultural realities of cities.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, in a *New Yorker* article about informal settlements in Lagos, the author asserts that “the really disturbing thing about Lagos’s pickers and venders is that their lives have essentially nothing to do with ours. They scavenge an existence beyond the margins of macroeconomics. They are, in the harsh terms of globalization, superfluous.”<sup>25</sup> This depiction seems to devalue and delegitimize the work that residents engage in. Furthermore, when describing migrants to the city, the author states that “the singular truth awaiting the six hundred thousand people who pour into Lagos from West Africa each year [is that] their lungs will burn with smoke and exhaust; their eyes will sting; their skin will turn charcoal grey and hardly any of them will ever leave.”<sup>26</sup> There is also a clear image that the expansion of informal settlements contributes to moral deterioration of a place; Lagos is described as “overrun with corrupt soldiers, politicians, and police, and with a mass of young people willing to do anything for money except honest work.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, it compares the expansion of slums to “fungus after it rains” and states that the “whole city suffers from misuse.”<sup>28</sup> The article questions the logic and rationality of the city through describing Lagos as chaotic and deteriorating and informal settlements as problems that need to be solved. The way the reporter attempts to decode the chaos of Lagos is by appealing to Western conceptions of propriety, order and meaning and in doing so, he creates distance between himself and the place and reaffirms the idea that slums are solely locations of poverty and despair.

### *2.1.2: The Stagnant Place? The need to incorporate agency, gendered and local knowledges*

As previously discussed, slum communities are often presented as being unchanging places, with little opportunity for residents to achieve social or economic advancement. The case study of West Point will demonstrate that in fact, community progress and individual agency are visible

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<sup>24</sup> Laguerre, M. S. (1994). *The informal City*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Packer, George (13 November 2006). “The Megacity: Decoding the Chaos of Lagos.” *The New Yorker*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

at individual, household, and community levels. Progress and agency is perhaps most evident through the increasing importance placed on children's education in lower income households.<sup>29</sup> There is a need to look beyond income and asset accumulation and begin considering human and social capital when attempting to define poverty level in a community.<sup>30</sup> Importantly, education is considered to be an "intermediate asset" rather than an end in itself. Similarly, social capital—whether an individual is involved in community groups, attends religious services, or participates in sports—is another important factor.<sup>31</sup> These social connections serve as a safety net for individuals when they are lacking basic necessities like food, shelter and healthcare. Similarly, the transformative role of self help strategies in West Point will be examined because of their proven success in ameliorating living conditions in slum communities. This thesis analyzes self help strategies in relation to the impact of women's organizations specifically.

A UN Global Report on Human Settlements suggests that "women's groups are usually the best informed about community conditions and about the mapping of facilities, households and community hazards."<sup>32</sup> It further states that women's groups as informal institutions are effective in determining priorities for relief and recovery efforts and that as a result, they should "be central to any mapping of institutional actors involved in maintaining urban safety and security."<sup>33</sup> The role of women's groups in security institutions is highlighted specifically because women have traditionally been ignored by institutions or 'protected' by them, rather than permitted to be "active participants in the processes that directly affect them."<sup>34</sup> Another important development has been the emergence of the judicial framework of human rights at the local level, where "the process of establishing legal norms—is increasingly being applied to local urban circumstances, including in the areas of crime and basic needs."<sup>35</sup> Whereas human rights were once discussed primarily at an international level, they are now openly discussed at local urban levels, including slum communities, and are helping women to obtain formal rights and protection and encouraging them to become effective participants in development and

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<sup>29</sup> This trend is evident in many developing regions. See De Soto, H., & Instituto Libertad y, D. (1989). *The other path : the invisible revolution in the Third World*. New York: Harper & Row. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Moser, Caroline and Andrew Felton. (2007). "Intergenerational Asset Accumulation and Poverty Reduction in Guayaquil, Ecuador, 1978-2004" in *Reducing Global Poverty: the case for asset accumulation*. 29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme. (2007). *Enhancing Urban Safety and Security: global report on human settlements 2007*. London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan. pp.23-41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

reconstruction efforts. Human rights are often discussed as flowing from the top-down and having little practical application at the community level; however, they can now be seen as emerging from the ground-up, where laws and policies related to human rights are influenced by local, rather than international agendas. The UN Settlement Report specifies that the changing application of human rights results in a much broader view of the process of change and development, where women's groups actually create precedents and guidelines for community development.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the report states that women's participation not only leads to increased recognition of women as legitimate community actors, it leads to different and more sustainable community outcomes.

Furthermore, it is useful to distinguish between external and internal forms of knowledge and how these two forms of knowledge impact the way we understand our environments. Internal images or local knowledge is characterized by the specific community relations and environmental interactions that are of importance to the residents themselves. This relates to the idea that places have meaning in direct proportion to the degree that people feel "inside" that place.<sup>37</sup> The case study of West Point will highlight differences between external (state) and internal (resident) knowledge and its relevance to designing development and planning programs that appropriately address the challenges faced by the West Point community.

It is also essential to consider the differing notions of justice and injustice that can exist in informal settlements. While mainstream media often uses examples of material conditions and poverty to evoke a sense of injustice, local residents' interpretation of justice and injustice is often very different, and emphasizes honesty, respect and reciprocity. The ways in which residents experience and respond to incidences of injustice must be considered.<sup>38</sup> Simply by reclaiming land and settling in a place, residents of slums are in fact asserting their rights. They "are not claiming an abstract right, they are taking an actual place. This act—to challenge society's denial of place by taking on your own—is an assertion of being in a world that routinely denies the dignity and validity inherent in a home."<sup>39</sup> While the impact of power

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Knox, Paul L, Sallie A. Marston, Alan E. Nash, and Paul L. Knox. (2004). *Human Geography: Places and Regions in Global Context*. Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 258.

<sup>38</sup> See Goldstein, D. M. (2003). *Laughter out of place : race, class, violence, and sexuality in a Rio shantytown*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>39</sup> Neuwirth, R. (2005). *Shadow cities: A billion squatters, a New Urban World*. New York: Routledge, 311.



relations on the freedom of residents must be acknowledged, it is important not to ignore the agency that people possess and the ways in which they choose to assert this agency.

## **2.2: Community Planning, Urban Policy, and the African State**

### *2.2.1: Defining Community Planning and Urban Policy*

African state policies towards informal settlements often correspond to Western notions of urban order and form, whereby informal settlements are perceived by states to be containers for crime, growth of the informal economy, social ills and general disorder. Furthermore, the reduced legibility of slums can be seen as creating problems for states' attempts to organize cities and control populations.<sup>40</sup> Analyzing government policies and action within slum communities at the local, municipal and municipal levels must begin with a clear purpose and definition of community planning and urban policy. This thesis will refer to urban planning as “community planning” because it takes into account a wider range of stakeholders that are invested in changing elements of a community’s physical, built or natural environment.<sup>41</sup> The purpose of planning is to attain a preferred future built and natural environment. The purpose can also be to achieve a goal desired by citizens. One useful definition states that “Community preferences arise from either, or both, of two basic needs: responding to impending problems and pursuing broader aspirations.”<sup>42</sup> As will be shown in Chapter 6, there is a disconnect in community planning in informal settlements: Liberian governments at the municipal and national levels are focussing on broader aspirations, or what this thesis will call “urban ideals”, while very little attention has been devoted to responding to immediate and impending problems in West Point. Urban Policy will be defined as “all those explicit decisions intended to shape the physical, spatial, economic, social, political, cultural environment and institutional form of cities.”<sup>43</sup>

In relation to Liberian urban policies, a key area of analysis will be governance challenges. Indeed, “weaknesses and lack of financial capacity of formal municipal, state, or

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<sup>40</sup> Examples include Huchzermeyer, M. (2010). 'Pounding at the Tip of the Iceberg: The Dominant Politics of Informal Settlement Eradication in South Africa', *Politikon*, 37: 1, 129 -148; Vambe, M. T. (2008). *The hidden dimensions of Operation Murambatsvina*. Harare: Weaver Press.

<sup>41</sup> Wates, N., Urban Design Group., Prince's Foundation., & South Bank University. (2000). *The community planning handbook: How people can shape their cities, towns and villages in any part of the world*. London: Earthscan.

<sup>42</sup> Hodge, Gerald and Gordon, David. (2008). *Planning Canadian Communities*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Nelson Education Ltd. 5.

<sup>43</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme.(2007). *Enhancing Urban Safety and Security: global report on human settlements 2007*. London; Sterling, VA: Earthscan. 6.

provincial institutions are important underlying contributors to the chronic condition affecting vulnerability of individual communities.”<sup>44</sup> When relating institutional capacity to local level community challenges, these weaknesses are actually exacerbated by the fact that governments frequently “refuse to recognize and/or cooperate with community-level institutions.”<sup>45</sup>

### 2.2.2: *Designing for the End User*<sup>46</sup>

This thesis does not attempt to devise concrete design solutions for West Point; rather, its objective is to understand community needs and priorities from the perspective of slum dwellers and to highlight the importance of considering how these priorities differ from the urban policy objectives of the Liberian state. From a policy perspective, governments see the chaos of informal settlements and the difficulties in regulating them, but often fail to see the inherent order and value that is there. This brings in a different kind of ‘design thinking,’ one that considers the personal side of housing design and function, not simply the public side. This involves looking at important livelihood indicators that take into account the ways in which an individual in a slum community chooses to invest and how. From this perspective, housing is not just about lifestyle and consumer durables, but about the process of integrating oneself and family into a community. A useful distinction can be drawn between formal and informal types of housing. Whereas formal housing design takes into consideration land, shelter, basic public services and markets (in that order), informal housing design often involves these formal rules being reversed.<sup>47</sup> First and foremost, housing is a place for economic survival, including work opportunities, other forms of income generating activities, and attaining the necessities of life. Secondly, housing is a place for living, building a family and social network, for raising children. Finally, the physical features of housing, such as wall material, flooring, and lighting, and land are considered. Importantly, in order to achieve what Caroline Moser calls a “positive livelihood,” no single category of asset accumulation is sufficient on its own.<sup>48</sup> Rather, physical,

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<sup>44</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme.(2007). 36.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See Smith, C. E., & Cooper-Hewitt Museum. (2007). *Design for the other 90%*. New York: Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

<sup>47</sup> Bhatt, Vikram.(1999). “Architecture for a developing India.” *Harvard Design Magazine*. 38-32. Also notes that “sites-and-services” planning methods distinguish between house plots and circulation spaces, but do not address the diversity of “street activities” in informal settlements—that is, the street as a place for work, shopping, commercial activity, as well as the setting for social and religious ceremonies.

<sup>48</sup> Moser, Caroline et al. (2001). “To Claim our Rights: Livelihood security, human rights and sustainable development.” <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/1816.pdf>. 6.

financial, human, social, and natural capital must all come together.<sup>49</sup> The key question therefore is not *if* a particular service is delivered, but *how* is it delivered, and how design strategies can work to improve services at the user's end.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT

### 3.1: “The Love of Liberty Brought Us Here”

Liberia, a small country on the Western coast of Africa, has had a unique, yet tumultuous history that has shaped the sociological, cultural and political realities of present day Liberia. Alongside Ethiopia, Liberia is the only other sub-Saharan African state not to have been colonized by a European power. The modern state of Liberia was founded by emancipated African American slaves that formed the American Colonization Society, which had the aim of creating a colony on the coast of Africa for settlers from the southern United States.<sup>50</sup> The history of the Liberian state begins with the establishment of Cape Mesurado in 1821 when the first group of African American settlers arrived. Cape Mesurado was later named Monrovia after the American President James Monroe.<sup>51</sup> Although Americo-Liberians represent the minority of the population of Monrovia, they occupied most positions in government until a coup instigated by Samuel K. Doe in 1980.<sup>52</sup> Indigenous ethnic groups, including the Bassa, Gio, Kpelle, Vai, Loma, Kissi, Gola, Dei, Khrahn, Belle, Mende, Mandingo, Grebo, Mano and Kru, constitute 95% of the population. The historical connections between Liberia and the United States continue to influence many aspects of Liberian culture, from the Liberian flag and the structure of the constitution, to architectural styles reminiscent of Southern American states like Virginia, Maryland and Georgia. Liberia today is an amalgamation of Western and indigenous culture and while urbanization and the fourteen year civil war led to a forced breakdown of some societal divisions, ethnic group identification is still prevalent.<sup>53</sup>

#### *3.1.1: Between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mesurado River: A Brief History of West Point*

Informal settlements have existed in Liberia since at least the 1950s, and began to expand rapidly in the 1960s and early 1970s, with inhabitants migrating from surrounding cities and neighboring West African countries. West Point is a peninsula jutting out between the Atlantic Ocean and Mesurado River (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). According to the town council and residents, West Point was officially named one of Monrovia’s townships in 1960. It is made of a sandy piece of

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<sup>50</sup> Fraenkel, Merran. *Tribe and Class in Monrovia* [in English]. London: Published for the International African Institute by the Oxford University Press, 1964. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Doe’s regime lasted from 1980-1990 when he was murdered in a coup instigated by rebel leader and later President, Charles Taylor.

<sup>53</sup> Olukojun, A. (2006). *Culture and customs of Liberia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. 110.

land adjoining the busy Water Street market area. The area began to form in the 1940s through deposits of sand dredged during the construction of new port facilities on nearby Bushrod Island. As a result, West Point consists largely of recovered land, leaving it in relatively unambiguous public ownership relative to virtually all other areas of Monrovia, where historical claims still exist.<sup>54</sup> Beginning in the 1970s, Monrovia entered a period of considerable population growth as a result of a natural increase in migration and urbanization. In the first period of rapid urban growth, the Liberian government ignored housing problems in the urban core and “put financial resources into other development sectors.”<sup>55</sup> West Point began to expand as well, with the population increasing from 19, 667 residents in 1975 to 25, 000 in the mid-1980s.<sup>56</sup>



**Figure 3.1: Map of West Point's location in relation to Monrovia. Source: European Space Agency/ Médecins Sans Frontières**

Despite the infrastructural and demographical changes in Monrovia resulting from the 1989-2003 Liberian civil war, including an enormous influx of internally displaced persons into the city during the war and immediately after, a great deal of continuity can be seen between the conditions in pre and post-war West Point, largely attributable to the absence of any significant upgrading programs since the late 1980s. During this time, the National Housing Association conducted participatory planning surveys of seven communities in Monrovia, including New Kru Town, Clara Town and West Point. A number of housing estates were created to accommodate a growing urban population, but the main beneficiaries of these projects were middle class families as the houses were allocated based on political connections and need. Few of the houses went to the urban poor population and as a result, the estates had a minimal impact of the informal settlements they were designed to replace.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, a participatory planning survey was conducted between 1979 and 1985, with the intention of gauging resident priorities and devising plans for community upgrading.

<sup>54</sup>Williams, C. Rhodri. (2011). “Beyond Squatters’ Rights: Durable Solutions And Development-Induced Displacement In Monrovia, Liberia.” The Norwegian Refugee Council. [http://www.nrc.no/arch/\\_img/9568756.pdf](http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9568756.pdf) .24.

<sup>55</sup> Lacey, Linda and Owusu, Stephen. (1988). “Low Income Settlements in Monrovia, Liberia” in *Spontaneous Shelter: International Perspectives and Prospects*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 222.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

The results of this survey are illuminating: many of the priorities highlighted by residents, including toilets, healthcare clinics, water, public lighting, and schools are the same concerns discussed by residents today. A range of projects were completed by the NHA, including the construction of four sanitation units, a market center with forty-nine stalls, a primary school, thirty-six new rental units and two miles of roads. The onset of the civil war in 1990 halted the implementation of any additional upgrading programs.

### 3.2: West Point Today

Today, the majority of the residents of Monrovia live in informal settlements with little current security of tenure or access to services.<sup>58</sup> The war dramatically increased the population of the capital city when people fled from neighbouring cities and rural areas where the fighting was initially concentrated. At the height of the conflict, the population of Monrovia tripled from its initial 600,000. The population of Monrovia currently stands at 1.3 million, out of a total Liberian population of 3.3 million.<sup>59</sup>



**Figure 3.2: Map of West Point. Source: Open Street Maps**

In West Point, it is estimated that one third of the population are displaced persons who fled to the community to seek refuge during the war. West Point was considered to be one of the safer communities in Monrovia during the conflict as a result of there being only one access road in the community and more accessible sources of food because of its coastal location and less expensive food prices.<sup>60</sup> The influx of displaced persons has resulted in a noticeable expansion of West Point and the proliferation of new informal settlements as a whole. Many people started living in abandoned buildings or the back of businesses due to the scarcity of land and affordable housing in Monrovia. Consequently, makeshift zinc structures are intermixed with multiple story apartment buildings and businesses in many areas of the city. West Point now has a population of between 60,000 and 80,000 inhabitants in six communities. The majority of

<sup>58</sup> Williams, C. Rhodri. (2011). “Beyond Squatters’ Rights”, 20.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Background information about West Point is obtained from interviews with the Commissioner of West Point, Sylvester S. Lamah . (July 7, 2011).

people in West Point survive on fishing activities, and an estimated sixty percent of residents belong to the Kru ethnic group, one of the sixteen ethnic groups in Liberia.<sup>61</sup>

West Point is one of the oldest informal settlements in Liberia, and is consequently one of the more established. It is treated as a de facto administrative unit within the city of Monrovia and has its own town council, police station, a court magistrate, a number of schools, churches and mosques and an asphalt access road that was completed this year. Within West Point, there are a variety of housing types, reflecting differing levels of land availability, material availability, migration patterns and socioeconomic statuses. Most houses are shelters built from wood siding or corrugated zinc and cardboard or concrete block units. Improvements to housing structures are done by the residents themselves with the general pattern that tin and zinc will gradually be replaced by concrete blocks as residents accumulate the resources to make these improvements. The old structure will eventually be torn down and the material sold to other community members. While the majority of West Point residents rent rooms in houses, those that do own houses do not have legal rights to the land, but rather obtain “squatters rights” from the local town council. Despite there being no legal basis for the collection of taxes by the town council, the town council takes the system of squatter’s rights quite seriously and it is generally accepted that to build a house in the community, one must first go to the commissioner’s office to purchase squatters’ rights. So far, there has been a tacit acceptance of informal settlements in Liberia by local and national governments, partially attributable to there being no clear legal framework for dealing with informal settlements. As a result, “many of the administrative acts affecting slum dwellers are essentially based on established practice rather than a formal legal or even policy basis.”<sup>62</sup>

The tacit acceptance of informal settlements is connected to the ambiguity of land tenure laws in Liberia. There is confusion concerning the general status and application of policies and laws regarding legal rights to land and property.<sup>63</sup> The connection between ambiguity of land laws and the extent of tenure insecurity is clear.<sup>64</sup> As a result, disputes over land ownership are prevalent throughout Liberia. Returning land owners have the power to forcibly evict squatters from their land. In informal settlements that are not on publically owned land, resettlement and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, C. Rhodri. (2011). “Beyond Squatters’ Rights”, 20.

<sup>63</sup> Unruh, John, D. (2009). “Land rights in postwar Liberia: The volatile part of the peace process.” *Land Use Policy*, 26(2), 425-433. 427.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

any potential upgrading projects could prove to be quite complicated.<sup>65</sup> In West Point, because the land is publically owned, there are no disputes over statutory deeds for land. Jon Unruh, in his study of post-conflict land rights in Liberia, states that “a broader problem is that a great deal of land tenure decisions need to be and are made by the general population as a matter of the social relations of day to day life.”<sup>66</sup> The system of squatters’ rights in West Point is an example of this: despite resident knowledge that the squatters’ rights system does not permit people to build permanent structures on land, many of the structures are permanent because of the length of time that many people have lived in the community. The lack of transparent and consistent policies and procedures regarding upgrading and relocation of slum communities in Liberia, as well as jurisdictional ambiguity, has exacerbated problems of tenure insecurity in West Point. Evictions and demolitions fall within the jurisdiction of the Monrovia City Corporation (MCC), comprising the mayor and city council as well as a number of national ministries such as the Ministry of Public Works (MPW).<sup>67</sup> However, the extent of MCC’s jurisdiction in West Point remains ambiguous; according to the Commissioner of the Township of West Point, only the national government has authority in the community.

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<sup>65</sup> Peace Island, another slum community in Liberia, is an example of this.

<sup>66</sup> Unruh, John, D. (2009). “Land rights in postwar Liberia.” 428.

<sup>67</sup> Lamah, Sylvester. Commissioner of West Point. Personal Interview. (July 7, 2011).



## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1: The Research Plan**

The research for this thesis took place over a two month time span, from mid-June until mid-August, 2011. In total, sixteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted: 13 with residents of West Point, two with federal government officials from the Ministry of Public Works and one with the Mayor of Monrovia. Seven of the residents interviewed were women, while six were men. In total, I visited West Point 16 times. A second method used was observational field research, which included taking field notes, photos and videos.

One of my primary concerns was with becoming knowledgeable about the West Point community before beginning research there. Before beginning research, I had lived in Monrovia for one month and became introduced to the community during that time through an internship with an international development organization. When it came to actually beginning the research, I was culturally familiar with Liberia and was comfortable living and working in Monrovia. I visited West Point three times before writing the first draft of my interview schedule. I then shared this draft with Liberian colleagues to ensure that the questions would be culturally appropriate and understandable, despite differences in Liberian and Canadian English.

An initial challenge was designing a project that was sensitive to the diversity of the West Point community. The aim of the research is not to provide a representative study of West Point, but rather to produce an illustrative study that adds to our understanding about the ways individual people understand and make sense of their own environment. There are 16 ethnic groups in Liberia, all of which are present in West Point. Sixty percent of the West Point population is of Kru ethnicity, and a significant number of Ghanaians, Guineans, and immigrants from many other West African countries live in West Point. Each group was geographically concentrated to some degree; thus, an easy method for ensuring a diversity of participants was to conduct interviews in various areas of the community. Moreover, because gender impacts the way people interact with, respond to, and understand their surroundings, it was important to include an even number of female and male participants.<sup>68</sup> Age, education level, and ethnicity were also significant considerations as these factors have a noticeable influence on community

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<sup>68</sup> In total, 7 female and 6 male residents were interviewed and 5 government officials (1 female, 4 males) were interviewed.

experiences and life perspectives. All participants were above 18 years of age, with participant ages ranging from 18 to 64.

#### *4.1.1: Interviewing Residents of West Point*

The primary research method used was semi-structured interviews with residents of West Point. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. The selection process was a multistep process. To select the individuals that would participate in the study, I worked with a facilitator from West Point.<sup>69</sup> For personal safety reasons, and also to ensure a more in-depth, collaborative research process, it was imperative that I worked with someone who had lived in West Point for many years, was a widely respected member of the community, and knew West Point extremely well. It was also necessary for the individual to be interested in the research project and willing to devote a significant amount of time to it. The community member that became the facilitator was a male of Grebo ethnicity who had lived in West Point for over 20 years and was involved in various aspects of community life as a volunteer for a local non-governmental organization.

In working closely with a particular individual in the community, it was necessary for me to make the objectives and expectations for the research clear. It was also important for me to ensure that the interviews were not simply a reflection of the facilitator's social circle, but descriptive of the community as a whole. A necessary criterion for all interviews was therefore anonymity between the facilitator and the participants. The research design began with initial meetings in West Point with the facilitator. These meetings involved discussing the purpose and objectives of the research, detailing the specifications of the project, and asking for feedback about initial research plans. This collaborative process was invaluable because it enabled me to establish foundational knowledge of West Point, expanded interview opportunities and served as an essential resource when questions arose. Though the facilitator was with me throughout much of my time in the community, he was not present during the interviews themselves. In order to more accurately present the opinions of the participants of this study, I have chosen to profile four individuals in the analysis section (Chapter 5) so that the reader can acquire a better sense of who the participants are and the stories that they had to tell about their community. The four

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<sup>69</sup> Also known as a "gatekeeper", see Campbell, L. M., Gray, N. J., Meletis, Z. A., Abbott, J. G., & Silver, J. J. (2006). "Gatekeepers and Keymasters: dynamic relationships of access in geographical fieldwork". *Geographical Review*. New York, 96, 97-121.

profiles were chosen because together, they reflect the diversity of the themes that emerged over the course of this research.

One difficulty encountered while conducting research was a gender disparity in the openness of participants to engage in detailed discussions. Men were often more willing to talk in depth after questions were posed, whereas women, with some exceptions, were more reserved when the interviews began.<sup>70</sup> In many instances, it simply took more time for women to feel comfortable conversing during the interviews; however, by the end of the interview, the female participants were often just as open to discussing their thoughts and opinions. Possible explanations for this disparity will be discussed in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

In addition to interviews with individuals, I also interviewed members of a women's organization called West Point Women for Health and Development. During a first visit to the center, I interviewed the president of the organization. I then went to the centre an additional two times and spoke to the members that were present. Throughout the research process, I conducted both prearranged interviews and unplanned interviews with residents. While the discussions were semi-structured and had particular themes, the questions were open and discussion-based, revolving around themes that surfaced throughout the interview. In this way, the interviews were partially directed by the participants themselves and I aimed to record the information that people most wanted to share about West Point and the intricacies of living there. Themes were discussed by all groups, but the depth with which each was discussed depended on the salience of the topic.

All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis within 48 hours of the interview. While travelling outside of the community, my backpack containing the first tape recorder, which held four untranscribed interviews, was stolen. No personal details about the participants (names, ages, ethnicities, residential histories) were on the recorder as these details were written down on separate consent forms. As such, the theft of the recorder did not compromise the safety or anonymity of participants.<sup>71</sup>

Common themes discussed included:

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<sup>70</sup> Issue also discussed by Robson, E. (1994) From teacher to taxi driver: Reflections on research roles in developing areas, in Robson, E. and K. Willis (eds.) *Postgraduate Fieldwork in Developing Areas: A Rough Guide*. UK: Developing Areas Research Group, Institute of British Geographers, pp.36-59.

<sup>71</sup> The four participants were notified of the theft soon after the theft occurred and an incident report was immediately filed.

- Residential history: length of time living in West Point, reasons for moving, reasons for staying
- Discussions about everyday lived experiences (e.g. employment, family life, cooking and leisure activities)
- Discussions about housing and physical features of the community, including layout, material makeup and location of houses and community infrastructure (roads, water, soccer fields, etc.)
- Discussions about social relations: neighbours, friends, political associations, community organizations
- Discussions about population, demographic, and structural change in West Point.
- The future of West Point: What will West Point be like in 10 years? In what ways will it change? In what ways will it stay the same?

The location of the interviews was another pertinent consideration because it was essential that participants felt as comfortable and confident participating as possible. The location of the interview became an avenue for learning about the participants because people behave differently in their own environments.<sup>72</sup> For this reason, the interviews were conducted at a location of the interviewees' choice, but with the parameters that the location be a place where the participants spend a large part of their time. For many people, this meant conducting interviews at their homes. For one participant, the interview was at a computer café, for another, it was at a local church across from her home. In addition, the location was not always limited to one particular place. If a respondent wanted to show me a different area of their community, I would walk with them during the interview. In all cases, I felt that it was important to conduct interviews in an environment where participants felt comfortable talking to me and openly expressing their opinions. The strategy of on-site member checking was also used through verifying information with participants to ensure the accuracy of collected data.

#### *4.1.2: Interviewing State Officials*

In addition to interviewing residents of West Point, another research objective was to talk to state officials about their priorities for West Point and their understandings of urbanism in Monrovia

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<sup>72</sup> Valentine, G. (2005). "Tell me about...: Using interviews as research methodology" in Flowerdew, R. And D. Martin, (Eds.) *Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project*. Harlow, Longman: 110-127. 118.

more generally. Five government officials were interviewed: the commissioner of the Township of West Point, the Assistant Minister of Planning, two zoning commissioners from the Ministry of Public Works and the Mayor of Monrovia. The small number of government officials interviewed is due in part to problems of restrictive access and the length of time it took to arrange interviews; however, those officials who were interviewed occupy high positions in national and municipal government, are principal authorities on urban planning issues in Liberia, and devoted significant amounts of time to the interview. Interviews were semi-structured, with attention given to plans for development of West Point and ideas of urban order, infrastructure and sanitation.

Common themes discussed included:

- Development and Progress: how Monrovia has changed since 2006, plans for the Waterside Market and West Point areas
- Division of responsibilities: municipal versus federal policy divisions in regards to urban renewal and reform
- Order and sanitation: roads, relocation, commercialization, environmental assessments
- Ideal city spaces: African and American urban ideals

#### **4.2: Observational Field Research**

Observational field research took place over the course of three months while living, working and researching in Liberia. I kept field notes in an electronic journal throughout the study. During the thesis work, I visited West Point two to three times per week on average. Each visit would last a minimum of three hours and a maximum of a full day. The first visits involved simply walking around the community, visiting different focal points (the soccer stadium, beach, the police station, markets, fishing areas, local businesses) and meeting with community youth groups who were coming up with youth initiative programs through the support of a local NGO.<sup>73</sup> Walking around the community with various participants, and spending time with individuals in their homes, businesses, churches and community centers, was a key part of my observational field research. It was also important to visit the community at different times of

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<sup>73</sup> The youth group was comprised of approximately 20 18-25 year olds. While most participants were male, there were also 2 female members.

day, different days of the week and on the weekends to observe differences in community activities and dynamics.

The second component of my observational field research was observing the overall urban environment of Monrovia, including the physical and infrastructural makeup of the city as well attitudes and responses of citizens towards national and municipal policies and governance. Observational field research was essential to acquiring an understanding of local attitudes and priorities towards urban order, improvement, cleanliness and repair both within and outside of West Point. Interviews were transcribed and field notes typed within two days of the interview or community visit.

#### **4.3: Research Challenges and Constraint**

One of the most important project design considerations was analyzing my own position in the community as a visitor and a researcher.<sup>74</sup> Concerns of positionality and power are inevitable in any research, but were particularly prevalent in this research because of the social and economic realities of life in West Point and the real needs that exist in the community. As a Canadian researcher, power, privilege and racial divisions were inevitable and it was therefore imperative that I devise strategies to reduce any barriers to communication. One approach for doing this was that I carried only a small tape recorder, a few sheets of paper and a pen on field visits. In addition, interviews proceeded like a dialogue, in a relaxed manner that allowed ample time for participants' questions and comments. When I organized interviews with community members, it was at a place and time of their choosing. My objective was to learn from residents of West Point and the thesis research aimed to provide opportunities for participant-directed research.

A common discussion point during conversations with many community members was the idea that everything in West Point can become a business or serve as a revenue-generating activity. One constraint I initially encountered was therefore recruiting participants who did not want compensation in return for their participation. Eventually, challenges of voluntary participation led to a change in the participant recruitment strategy. After conducting a planned interview, I would immediately conduct an additional interview with a randomly selected

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<sup>74</sup> See Valentine (2005); Dunn (2010: 115) has noted that there is usually “a complex and uneven power relationship involved in which information, and the power to deploy that information, flows mostly one way from the informant to the interviewer.”

individual. Individuals were often more relaxed and open to participating when the interviews were not planned in advance.

Additional considerations were issues related to personal safety while visiting West Point. Although I always felt safe while in West Point, certain safety precautions were necessary, including always being accompanied by another person, taking private transportation, being driven into the community, and only visiting during the daytime. Time constraints were another notable challenge because it was sometimes difficult to arrange private transportation to West Point and I consequently did not have complete control over the length and timing of my visits. In addition, gaining access to high profile government officials was challenging and it took the full nine weeks of field research to organize interviews with the Mayor of Monrovia and Ministry of Public Works officials. Lastly, there is a dearth of statistical data available about West Point, including basic demographic and economic data. Repeated attempts at obtaining statistical information about West Point from the Liberian Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) were unsuccessful.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE VIEW FROM HERE: RESIDENT IMAGES OF WEST POINT**

The objective of this project is to gain an improved understanding of a particular informal settlement community in Liberia from the perspective of residents who live there. In the analysis that follows, I wish to focus on my first research question, how do West Point residents view their home? Do these views differ from state views of informal settlements? In Section 5.2, I will turn to my second research question, which addresses differences in the lived experiences of women and men in West Point. Then in Chapter 6, I will address my third research question, namely: could an improved understanding of the livelihood patterns and priorities of West Point residents influence the way governments and development organizations respond to this community's challenges?

Through exploring these questions, I hope to demonstrate how an emphasis on the internal dynamics of West Point and the priorities of West Point residents could positively influence the way governments, planning agencies, and development organizations respond to the challenges faced by the West Point community. It is necessary to hear the voices of the people, to listen to individual stories, and to learn about how West Point shapes and is shaped by everyday life and livelihood patterns. Discourses of 'need'<sup>75</sup> are dominant within the academic and development literature of informal settlements and these discussions are undeniably important; there are obvious and immediate needs in West Point, including an absence of adequate sanitation facilities, elevated crime rates, frequent outbreaks of cholera and malaria, too many children and too few schools, to name only a few. However, what are often left undisclosed are the community dynamics and design strategies that help to explain the way slum communities' function. Individual agency, community history and progress are masked by discourses that do not extend beyond images of the dilapidated, disorganized, violent slum.

Where the Liberian urban development strategy currently falls short is in its failure to see informal settlements as more than a flaw in the recovering urban image of Monrovia. Slum communities are often described in terms of their infrastructural and organizational deficiencies: the number of schools that exist and not who has access to them, the existence of a health clinic and not the affordability and adequacy of the services provided there, the informality of economic activity, not the structures of reciprocity and community that contribute to a person's

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<sup>75</sup> See Staples, J. (2007); Stephens, C. (1991); Chaplin, S (1999); United Nations Human Settlements (2003); McFarlane, C. (2008). Huchzermeyer, M., and Karam, A. (2006).



survival. Approaching urban problems in slums in this way will ultimately lead to contrived and temporary solutions. It is necessary to repeatedly consider the opinions of informal settlement residents, to question dominant conceptions of the city and why they exist, and to keep the planning process as transparent and accessible as possible. In doing so, it may be possible to develop policies and programs that will lead to healthier and more sustainable urban environments.

## 5.1 The Physical Space

“Landscape is a powerful visual ideology; but it is also a structured portion of the earth within which people work and live and sleep, eat, make love, and struggle over the conditions of their existence.”<sup>76</sup>

It is first necessary to define a slum, or what West Point residents call a “ghetto community,” comparing resident definitions of a slum to the formal definition given by UN-HABITAT. The UN-HABITAT specifies that a slum household is a household that lacks any one or more of the following five elements: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing, sufficient living area.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, slums are not often recognized by public authorities as being integral parts of the city. In Monrovia, slums are mushrooming and no slum upgrading interventions are being undertaken.<sup>78</sup> Underpinning the resident definition of a slum community is the absence of the state. While most residents talked about the lack of government assistance in West Point from the perspective that the community “needs government to develop it because the citizens all by themselves cannot do that,” others attribute the lack of government presence to the strength of the West Point community: “the government views this as a strong community in that they don’t pay much attention.” In other descriptions, there appears to be something inherent in the definition of a slum that predetermines a government’s absence from the community. As one resident articulates, “they (*the government*) view West Point as a slum area so the immediate assistance that is supposed to come to West Point, it doesn’t. The government always stands back on West Point (*the programs*)

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<sup>76</sup> Mitchell, Don. (1996). *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> UN-Habitat.(2003). “Chapter 1: Development Context and the Millennium Agenda” in *The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements*. 16.

<sup>78</sup> UN-Habitat.(2009). Country Programme Document 2008-2009 - Liberia. 9.

*and services that residents feel should be offered in West Point are absent).*”<sup>79</sup> The commissioner of the township had something slightly different to say. He connected the label of a “ghetto community” with the desire to survive, stating that “West Point is a ghetto community in that most of the people that want survival in life view West Point as a place where they can rest their remaining life (*people can live in West Point for the rest of their lives*).” From this perspective, the ghetto community appears to be a place where people come to secure basic necessities like food and shelter and where conditions in the community aid in an individual’s survival.

The features that were repeatedly mentioned by participants as they described the physical characteristics of West Point help to establish a base understanding of the community from an insider’s perspective, helping to directly answer my first research question. Kevin Lynch’s classic work about perception and legibility of the city is useful in explaining the ways individuals understand and relate to their environment. Lynch argues that people create mental images of a city in relation to five features: paths, edges, nodes, districts and landmarks.<sup>80</sup> In describing West Point, residents repeatedly mentioned key landmarks such as the beach, the main road, the stadium or soccer field, the market, well, schools, and public toilet facility. Furthermore, the quality of the location of a house was often described in relation to these key landmarks. For instance, one woman described that the location of her house as being convenient because it is “not far from the road, not far from the toilet facility (...) so I live in an ideal area.”<sup>81</sup> Importantly, residents also described their community in terms of what it lacks: “the community is not lit, the whole community is dark”; “these houses do not have toilets.”<sup>82</sup> Residents also described the community in relation to other towns near Monrovia like Gardnersville and Paynesville: “on this side cheaper as compared to areas like Gardnersville, Paynesville and areas like that.”<sup>83</sup> House prices in West Point vary considerably. While rental costs for some rooms are 200LD (3US\$) per month, some cost closer to 1400LD (20US\$), depending on location, material, and size of the house. Acquiring land in West Point is difficult and there are definite politics and power relations surrounding housing and land access: “Not everyone can build”<sup>84</sup>; “it was easy for me because you know the society we live in now is a political society. I’m for the

<sup>79</sup>Lygory, male, age 48, born in West Point, some college education. (August 10, 2011).

<sup>80</sup> Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. Cambridge [Mass.: Technology Press ; MIT Press ; Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

<sup>81</sup> Comfort, age 28, Kpelle, Resident since 2005. No education. (July 29, 2011).

<sup>82</sup> David, age 47, Sapo tribe, Resident since 1991. High school graduate (July 12, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Morris, age 31, Kru, Resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

<sup>84</sup>Jacob, age 48. Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

Unity Party, I'm a member of the Unity Party and the commissioner there is for the Unity Party so for me it was very easier (*to obtain land*)."<sup>85</sup>

There is an important distinction between residents' use of the terms congestion versus population. The words "pack" and "jammed" were often used in relation to the close proximity of houses and the problems that can result from this: "if a fire catches your house, it will catch a lot of people's houses"<sup>86</sup>; "most of the areas are congested and there are no free areas so someone builds house next to another person's front door."<sup>87</sup> Population, on the other hand, is viewed as a positive thing for commercial and safety purposes: "The population has increased since then (*since the war*). It's good because you can see criminals now; there are more people to see criminals and what they are doing."<sup>88</sup>

The first resident profile, presented below, is of a male resident named Jacob Johnson. His story helps to further illustrate the physical features of West Point and more specifically, the importance of the location and the physical characteristics of the community in shaping everyday life and livelihood patterns for West Point residents. The profile also touches on West Point's history by providing a brief glimpse into conditions in West Point during Liberia's civil conflict and reasons for the substantial increase in the community's population during the war and immediately after.

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<sup>85</sup> Morris, age 31, Kru, Resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Agnes, age 26. Resident since 1996, No education (July 5, 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Zebedee, age 30, Grebo. Resident since 2005. High school, grade 10 (July 29, 2011).

*Jacob Johnson, Soccer Coach and Volunteer with NGO Right To Play*



**Figure 5.1: Jacob's family outside of their home in Kru Beach, West Point; Right: Jacob showing the beach and fishing areas of West Point**

Jacob Johnson, aged 48, has lived in West Point since 1980 when his father's contract with a company in the town of Caldwell was over. His family (shown in Figure 5.1) now rents one room in a zinc-sided house in the Kru Beach area of West Point for 300 LD (4\$ US) per month. Jacob's wife Agnes is a business woman who sells provisional food (biscuits, cold water, juice and bread) in the front of their house. This is a common form of economic activity in West Point and in other developing country urban settlements.

They have four children, two sons and two daughters. Jacob's oldest child attends the Bible Vocational School in West Point, which costs 1000LD (14US\$) per semester. Jacob used to live in central West Point, but the family moved to the Kru Beach area because of disputes between his wife and their neighbors.

Since moving to Kru Beach, Jacob says that things are peaceful. Jacob likes living on the "beach side" of West Point because his house looks out onto an open sandy area, which is used as a soccer field. At most times of the day, and in all weather conditions, there are groups of boys playing soccer on the field. Occasionally, uniformed teams and more organized games are played.

As Jacob says, "West Point is a football community". This statement might be influenced by the fact that he is a football coach for a local football team, and has been since 1989. Jacob says that soccer kept him safe during the Liberian civil war. The fighters, he says, respected him: "WWI, WWII, all of them respect me, most of them because some of them played football before and some of them know me. 'I'm a cool man.' 'He's coach,' they would say."

As you look out from Jacob's front porch, just past the field is Kru beach. There are a number of wooden canoe boats used by the fishing crews. A problem often discussed by Jacob is erosion due to the proximity of the houses to the water. Large waves have already damaged Jacob's house two times this year.

When Jacob walks around West Point, he walks with confidence. He knows the fastest routes to take, where to find certain people, what paths to use when other roads are flooded during the rainy season in Liberia. As an outsider, the paths at first seem incredibly confusing. Some paths are no more than a meter in width and people must duck or walk sideways to pass. The roads also seem almost endless. One can be walking for a significant amount of time through these tiny paths where life happens around you: there are women cooking rice outside of their houses and doing laundry, a mother braiding her daughter's hair, groups of people sitting on their stoops and socializing,

children laughing and running around, men playing checkers in a hollowed out building.

We occasionally hear someone yell out "coach" as Jacob and I walk past. Jacob would take a different path, the minor roads that he calls "roads to pass," each time we walk around the community. When asked how he decides which roads to take, he said it depended on the amount of time he had to get somewhere. He would take the main paved road if he had more time and could socialize along the way, and the roads to pass when he needed to get somewhere quickly.

In describing what West Point was like during the war, Jacob said "West Point was one way, have only one car road so everyone decide to come and then after the war, they could go back out. People from New Kru Town, Claratown, even in town, people came to West Point because during that time, people could get fish to eat so you're forced to go to West Point (...) in West Point during the war, all would be packed because you can buy goods cheaper."

### 5.1.2 The Image of the City

Because the very definition of a slum household is centered around what a place lacks in comparison to the broader city: sanitation, tenure security, water, durability of housing and sufficient living area, the absence of the state, it is easy to see informal settlements as completely separated from Monrovia. Informal settlements are often portrayed as being containerized or barricaded from larger cities.<sup>89</sup> However, in West Point, when discussing the aspects of the community that residents found most appealing, every participant referred in some way to the proximity of West Point to Monrovia and the ease at which they could walk to town. This represented a form of freedom for people:

If I don't have a car, living in West Point, you can walk to town. If I want to get up, I can go. Anywhere I want to go, I can walk and come back. If I lived in Congo Town, Barnersville, I would just have to stay. Now, if I want to go, I can go and walk to town. It is convenient.<sup>90</sup>

In addition, residents like the proximity of West Point to Monrovia because it makes it easier to help their families. Being close to Monrovia allows West Point residents to go to town for work or school and return without having to pay for transportation: "from here to the city, you don't pay transportation in West Point, but if I lived 12<sup>th</sup> Street (*Sinkor, Monrovia*), you need transportation and with the little money you're working for, you aren't able to sustain the

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<sup>89</sup> See Davis.(2006). *Planet of Slums*.

<sup>90</sup> Diana, age 52, Resident since 1975. Elementary School, 6th grade (August 9, 2011).

costs.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, residents highlighted the influence that West Point has on Monrovia. One woman stated that “even the bread you see in Monrovia comes from West Point.”<sup>92</sup> Fluidity of boundaries, as evidenced through the easy flow of people and goods, is an important feature of the everyday life of West Pointers. Their emphasis on the interconnectedness of West Point to Monrovia, rather than its separation from the Capital, is a defining feature of West Point for community members.

Conversely, residents also talked about the differences between West Point and Monrovia. West Point was often discussed either in relation to, or as part of, Monrovia. Residents most often referred to West Point as being “very close to Monrovia”, “not far from Monrovia”, “on the outskirts of Monrovia.” However, the community is also defined by some people in terms of its differences from Monrovia: “there is no trust in Monrovia...In West Point, people trust one another and help one another.”<sup>93</sup> One participant discussed the high crime rate in West Point as being a consequence of criminals “from outside” coming to West Point “to commit criminal acts and then go back.”<sup>94</sup> At other times (and sometimes in the same conversation), participants stressed the importance of seeing West Point as being part of Monrovia, using statements such as “West Point is the best community *in* Monrovia”; “West Point *is part of* Monrovia,” and “West Point is the *central part* of Monrovia.” Statements like these highlight the complex associations between West Point and Monrovia, and the interconnectedness of the two communities, but also West Pointers’ insistence on the community being distinct from Monrovia.

### 5.1.3 Economy, Community, and Reciprocity

A principal theme throughout all interviews was the idea that West Point is “an easy living place” in the sense that essential goods are cheaper in West Point than in neighboring communities and economic relations rest on the arguably noble ideas of reciprocity, community and honesty. The most common response when participants began talking about West Point was that “West Point is an easy living place”; “once you live here, this is very easier for you”; “for the common people, West Point is an easy life. You can economize.”<sup>95</sup> Residents used the phrase

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<sup>91</sup> Jacob, age 48. Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> Kulah, age 43, Cape Mount County. Resident since 1992. No education (August 1, 2011).

<sup>93</sup> Diana, age 52, Resident since 1975. Elementary School, 6th grade (August 9, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> Alieu Karh, age 42, Fula, born in West Point . Some high school, 10th Grade. (August 10, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Zebedee, age 30, resident since 2005. Some high School, grade 10. (July 29, 2011); Morris, male, age 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011); Kulah, female, age 43, From Cape Mount County. Resident

“easy living place” primarily to refer to the ability to buy fish, rice and bread at a cheaper price compared to nearby communities and then to sell the goods to make a profit: “the place is economical. You get little money (*small amounts of money*), you go on the beach and when people come fishing, you buy fish cheaper. There are two marketplaces in the area.”<sup>96</sup> In discussing livelihood, comparisons were made between West Point and other towns in Monteserrado, namely those that are outside of the city center (Congo Town, Brazaville, Paynesville) with considerably less access to Monrovia and even less access to the primary economic activity in West Point: fishing. It is estimated that approximately 60% of West Point’s population relies on fishing activities for their income.<sup>97</sup> This includes direct involvement as part of a fishing crew and indirect involvement through the purchasing, smoking and selling of fish from fronts of homes, along the main paved street and in markets. When people discussed their reasons for living in West Point, they spoke about it as being a choice and as a way of making their lives better and improving their families’ lives, too. However, residents also emphasized personal characteristics that are required to have a business in the community. Principal among these is strength: “the only thing is you have to be strong to make business. If you are strong, you can live in West Point.”<sup>98</sup>

The large part of the West Point population survives on fishing and informal business through the selling of provisional goods like water, soap, sugar, rice and bread.<sup>99</sup> Cooking, and selling essentially anything at all, is considered a way of making “quick money”. People described West Point as a commercial area, explaining that “if you have something to sell, you will get quick, quick money. If you have a business or something to sell, people will buy quickly.”<sup>100</sup> Residents attribute the ability to sell things quickly to the population density in West Point. A high population is considered to be a positive thing by most residents because more people results in more customers. This was highlighted when residents said: “for anything you sell here, it can go” and “there can be thousands of people selling here, at least everyone will get their daily bread, so this place is very cheap.” Security of basic needs exists through reciprocity

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since 1992. No education (August 1, 2011). Kulah is referring here to inexpensive housing and food as well as convenience of location (i.e. proximity of West Point to Monrovia).

<sup>96</sup>David, age 47, Sapo Tribe, Resident since 1991. High school graduate (July 12, 2011).

<sup>97</sup> Sylvester S. Lamah, age 31, Commissioner of West Point (July 7, 2011).

<sup>98</sup> Comfort, female, age 28, Kpelle, resident since 2005. No education (July 29, 2011).

<sup>99</sup> This is a common form of economic activity in other developing country urban settlements. See Cohen, Turner, Ross (2008) and Yankson P.W, (2000).

<sup>100</sup> Zebedee, male, age 30, Grebo, resident since 2005. High School, Grade 10 (July 29, 2011).

and reliance on one another: “fishermen go fishing and come here (*in town*) and we get fish.”

The money fishermen earn is then used to purchase other goods, to benefit other community members: “the fishermen helping us because they get money and when they go around here, they give you money. They also give you fish to eat” (See Figure 5.2). People are also given fish to sell for profit, “when you live in West Point and when they carry out fish to you, you get huge money”.



Figure 5.2: “Anything you sell, it can go:” Fishing crews in West Point; Monrovia in the background

Because of the ability to make “quick money” in West Point, some people come for the week and

leave on Saturday. Interestingly, there are also some people that do the opposite. One man worked at a restaurant in Mali Bamako, but came back to see his family in West Point.

There is a definite value of reciprocity in West Point and residents said that people willingly help each other when someone is in need of money or food:

If I am not working, in the morning I just get up, go on the road, I will eat. ‘See you, oh my friend, help me with 25 dollars?’ He’ll give me 25 dollars. The people in this community, they are together, they like people, they help people. Only if you are bad, people won’t like you. But even if you are not working and you are honest to people, you will eat every day.<sup>101</sup>

As you walk through the community, there will always be something to buy and always something to eat: “like outside of the house, the woman, I don’t have money to cook today, the woman is selling for 20\$, I don’t have food. I go to buy food and I eat. 10\$, 20\$, you can go here and buy food to eat. Only west point is the food so cheap.”<sup>102</sup> There is a credit system whereby if people do not have money, “you pay back.”<sup>103</sup> This was also discussed as a benefit for women in particular because they are responsible for most of the cooking: “a wife, if she decides she doesn’t want to cook for her husband or children, she can do.”<sup>104</sup> Reciprocity and values of community also ensure that when people “don’t have a hand” (or the money to buy food), they

<sup>101</sup> Anita, age 38, resident since 1970, some high school (July 14, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> While most residents discussed systems of credit and reciprocity in West Point, there was little mention of any constraints on entry to these informal economic activities that may exist. For example, Keith Hart (1973) discusses constraints such as social networks, informal skill, and knowledge, as well as the availability of time, capital, or credit in his study of Accra, Ghana.73.

<sup>104</sup> Kulah, age 43, From Cape Mount County. Resident since 1992. No education (August 1, 2011).



will still find enough food: “even if you are not working, if you are honest to people, you will eat.”<sup>105</sup> Once again, values of honesty and strength were pointed out as being key characteristics that people say are necessary to live in West Point.

Similarly, many residents talked about aspects of the social environment in West Point that create a sense of community. Helping one another, or the ideas of reciprocity discussed above, are central to the “sense of community” in West Point. Additionally, residents discussed a sense of unity: “in West Point, we are together”; “we West Pointers are united. We are very united”; “what helps one person helps everybody.” This idea of “togetherness” was often referred to when discussing death or illness:

“togetherness, like something happen to me, or if somebody die, I going to burry, they will follow me to represent me, to make me to feel proud so I can say ‘you know, I got people behind me’”; “West

Pointers are together in the sense that if something happens to you, everyone will come together and give you a hand. Everybody assists one another. I have an emergency, help is there. If somebody wants to harm me, then everybody will stay with me to go and assist me.”<sup>106</sup>

Social life in West Point is diverse. There are bars and clubs—wooden and tin structures where people (mainly men) go to drink, dance, and socialize. Sunday is considered a day of socializing, and for some, a day to go to church: “Sunday, you go all around and see people having merriment, playing music, dancing, drinking. People like social life. After a hard day of work, that will make you happy”<sup>107</sup> (see Figure 5.3). Other forms of social life include women’s cooperatives, where groups of women who are connected through church groups or common groups of friends, get together each week to pool money together. This money is then used to expand businesses, to access healthcare and improve houses. However, social relations are not always cordial and the density of people and houses in the community can create problems: “sometimes things are fine (*referring to social relations*), sometimes they are not because people



5.3 Men playing checkers in Bible Way, West Point

<sup>105</sup> Morris, age 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Agnes, age 26. Resident since 1996, No education (July 5, 2011) ; David, age 47, Sapu tribe, moved to West Point in 1991, high school graduate (July 12, 2011).

<sup>107</sup> David, age 47, Sapu tribe, moved to West Point in 1991, high school graduate (July 12, 2011).

can't afford things, might get angry at other people and start fights, but other people carry on their normal business.”<sup>108</sup> This highlights another necessary personal characteristic for living in West Point: patience. This is perhaps best understood from the following quote from a 31 years old resident named Morris who was born in West Point:

My grandfather told me that to live in this community, you have to be patient. If you want to live in West Point, you should have patience, you should be patient minded because this community is somewhere that people tempt you every day.

Similarly, another resident said “if you live in West Point, you have to be a patient minded person. If you don't have patience, you can't live here.”<sup>109</sup> West Point is a noisy place and on top of that, there is very little personal privacy.<sup>110</sup> This contributes to disputes between people. One man gave the example of being in his room sleeping and hearing people knocking on the tin walls: “you sleeping someone will come and knock the wall....so if you don't have patience, you'll follow that person and make fight with them. You have to be a patient minded before living in the community (...) if you are a man or woman without patience, you will get into problems every day.”<sup>111</sup>

#### *5.1.4 “When you approach by boat”: West Point’s Urban Image*

The previous section touched on the physical and social characteristics of West Point to begin addressing the first research question, how do West Point residents view their community? To finish answering this question, we now turn to discussions about the way West Pointers believe their community is perceived by outsiders. The most common images of slums are pictures taken from above: endless seas of tin roofs in no particular order, indiscernible to the outside observer. When discussing the physical features of the community as a whole—layout of houses, location of different facilities, external perceptions of West Point—very little attention was given to the physical characteristics of the community. While many people noted the congestion of the houses, and the health implications and privacy issues associated with this, there was little mention of the way the community’s physical characteristics might be viewed by people who are

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<sup>108</sup> Beatrice, age 18, born in West Point, high school graduate (July 21, 2011).

<sup>109</sup> Jacob, age 48. Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

<sup>110</sup> One major problem with crowded conditions in West Point is loss of privacy and dignity, especially for young girls and women. In “Achieving Healthy Urban Features in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” Anna K. Tibaijuka notes that sanitation issues in informal settlements “can be far more than a public health issue for a girl: it determines her privacy and dignity; it determines whether her potential to become a productive citizen in society will ever be fulfilled”. 29.

<sup>111</sup> Alieu Karh, age 42, Fula, born in West Point . High school, 10th Grade. (August 10, 2011).

not residents. However, one interviewee (profiled below) touched on his thoughts for what West Point would look like in the future and what he envisions for “New West Point.” As will be discussed in Chapter 6, resident and state opinions about ideas for development in West Point sometimes converge.

*David K. Chayee, Former Police Officer and Volunteer with West Point’s Catholic Church School*



**Figure 5.4: David K. Chayee in front of the Church School; walking with David around West Point**

David K. Chayee, aged 47, lives in central West Point with his wife, three daughters and one son. He moved to West Point in 1991 after returning to Monrovia from Ghana, where he lived for two years as a refugee. When he came back to Monrovia, he was married and had children. His initial intention was to live with his mother in the Sinkor area of Monrovia, but returned to find her house occupied by squatters who had moved there during the war. He said, “People find themselves living here (*West Point*) because when the war came, people moved into people’s homes, private homes. After the war subsided, people came back and had nowhere to go. Most of them came down on this side to find shelter.” David’s family moved to West Point and they now rent a room in a six room zinc house that his uncle and cousin own.

David brings a unique perspective on life in West Point because he was part of the police force in the community during the height of the Liberian civil war. He says that “the police are trying their best, but another problem is that the community is not lit—the whole community is dark—so there is no deterrent. The police are only patrolling the main street, they don’t go between houses to see what happens unless someone comes and says what’s happening, and then they can move there.” After retiring from the police force, David became a volunteer at the Catholic Church School in the community. David talks about methods for dealing with crime, being a renter in West Point and the tendency of landlords to increase rent when tenants fix their homes:

Sometimes when you are in your house, the house is damaged and you ask the renter and they don’t want to know. Then they tell you, if you can’t fix it on your own, then you should leave. And when you don’t want to take the money from the rent money, you have to still pay rent. It’s not proper. It’s very hard to find houses that are already fixed because most of the houses are tin shacks. So the first one I moved in was my own house. I fixed all the windows. Later on, I decided to fix the roof, that’s why I couldn’t pay the certain amount for rentage. After we renovated the house, they wanted to increase the rent.

Rent discrepancies have prompted David to move three times. He currently rents a room in a house that his uncle and cousin own and since moving there, there have been no problems. David has a clear vision for what West Point will look like in the future. When discussing how West Point will change, David said:

Well, many people in this community want to see West Point like other cities in other countries. West Point is an ideal area, between the sea and the river. In other communities, they use the coast to get tourists so we expect government to do more in the area to relocate estates (*houses*) for people that live here and rebuild the place. It would be nice for West Point because West Point is too close, WP is in the heart of the city and you see makeshift buildings, which do not look decent. So we need for government to carry on development because the citizens do not have the financial capability to build two, three story buildings around here; only the government can do that. There is a need for the government to plan, and put their plan to action by relocating everybody to develop West Point. Because when people are coming from the sea, there is no sign of attraction.”

David also discussed resident knowledge of government plans for relocation:

The people were hearing rumors that the government has decided to relocate people and people embrace it, but before [doing] that, you can't relocate people if you don't have a place for them. So they (*West Pointers*) agree, but they ask, ‘where will they go?’ They got to get a place for them. If they build 10 000 homes in the area, every family here can go and get one apartment there and then the people will move.”

When asked about people’s reactions to that plan, David said:

Those that have booming businesses here will not like it. If they go and start a new life, they will be thinking about the business they were making here. What they make here will not make it to the other side so everybody will not like the idea, but for me, I would prefer that because West Point is in the city and for a place that is in the city, it doesn't look like a city. Any traveler that comes using the sea, West Point is near the port and you see other country's ports, you don't see funny houses there, you see 4, 5, 6, 10 story buildings. You come to those ports and you know you're in a city. But when you enter our city, you will be asking, ‘have we reached the city?’ We want West Point to be a city that when you hit the city, you know that you're hitting a city.

David concluded by specifying that “if they try to develop West Point and relocate people, they will not change the name. It will still be West Point; they might call it “New West Point” because it will have 9, 10 story building. Then if you get a hand (*more money*), you can move back here.”

David emphasized that West Point “is a slum area, it needs government to develop it. The citizens all by themselves cannot do that (...) I'm in favor of the government developing West Point. One of the positive things I find about relocation is when I went to Ghana, and reached the harbour, I knew that I was in a city because of the structures we saw around the harbours. When we approached the harbours, we knew that ‘yes, we are in another country’. West Point gives the city a bad look.

When I asked David how he thought people from outside of West Point perceived the community, he replied “If you stand over the hill and look down at West Point, you will say ‘nah, those buildings do not need to be here.’” For David, development in West Point would mean introducing “a variety of decent buildings” because “currently, if someone were to go to the riverside, they would see a ton of makeshift buildings.” Significantly, David was the only participant to talk about the physical features of West Point in terms of their aesthetic appeal and the potential strategic and economic significance of the community.

## 5.2: The Changing Place

In this section, I will finish answering my first research question by discussing the way residents view progress and change in their community. Then in Section 5.2.2, I turn to my second research question, how do the lived experiences of women and men differ in West Point? I conclude the section by looking at resident priorities for development in West Point.

As discussed in Chapter 2, common portrayals of informal settlements center on stagnation, a lack of progress, an absence of morality and levels of crime. Furthermore, communities are often viewed as being inherently criminal. These depictions perpetuate the understanding that informal settlements are all but impossible to live in and that people automatically feel insecure in their environment. They also obscure gender disparities in the lived experiences of women and men in slum communities. As will be discussed in Section 5.2.3, many of the infrastructural and environmental problems visible in the late 1980s in West Point have not changed and indeed, resident priorities remain largely the same. However, changes (both positive and negative) are evident, as a result of the efforts of individuals, community organizations and changes in the physical landscape itself.

When residents discussed how people outside of West Point perceived their community, they would refer to phrases such as “no good people come from West Point”; “West Point is more dangerous”; “there are many bad criminals in West Point”; “they talk a whole lot of bad things about West Point.” When one resident was talking about what people say about West Point in Freeport (the main commercial port in Liberia), he said “people said the Township of West Point was very bad because of crime. Sometimes criminals would even come in the day and take things.”<sup>112</sup> In one woman’s description of the external perceptions of the community, she said “people go around and say West Point is a gangster area: ‘this place,’ they say ‘people here are bad, bad people.’ They say ‘no good people, no good things are here.’”<sup>113</sup> In response, she said “but good things are here. We’ve got good people here. It just depends on how you live your life...we’ve got good, good neighbors that when you're sick, and your family is not around at that moment, your neighbors can come and pick you from that place and carry you to the hospital.”

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<sup>112</sup> Zebedee, age 30, Grebo. Resident since 2005. High School, Grade 10 (July 29, 2011).

<sup>113</sup> Anita, age 38, resident since 1970,.Some high school (July 14, 2011).

Other respondents to these portrayals emphasized that the community is safe: “this community is quiet, oh. If you don’t get in people’s way, they won’t get in your way.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, a female resident noted that “security has increased and there are not as many criminals now.”<sup>115</sup> Other participants emphasized that “this community is safe. Even during the war, it was safe” and “if you keep to yourself, there will be no problem.”<sup>116</sup> Another woman named Anita said, “We have a lot of good people in this community, but because other people are bad, they take our community to be all bad. But we have good people in this society that help people every day.” Residents also pointed to the good that comes *out* of West Point, through the people from the community who occupy high positions in government: “we have good characters. People from West Point serve the government, in the majority of agencies and ministries. If you go there, you will find West Pointers.”<sup>117</sup> Pride of place is evident in many of these statements; residents discuss the community’s progress in terms of rising levels of education, successful businesses and securing basic needs. Pride of place also originates from community-directed change. The next section discusses ideas of progress and success, but also hardship and struggle, from the perspective of some of the women in West Point to directly address my second research question.

### 5.2.1: Ideas of Progress

*Anita Jebbah, homeowner and seller of provisional goods*



**Figure 5.5: Anita Jebbah sitting outside of her home and business in West Point, Monrovia**

Anita Jebboe is 38 years old. She has one daughter and one son, ages 23 and 9, is of ethnic Kru background and was raised in West Point. She has lived in the same house since she was born and inherited it from her grandmother who moved to West Point in 1943. She now

<sup>114</sup> Nathaniel, age 50, Resident since 1983. High school graduate. (July 21, 2011).

<sup>115</sup> Agnes, age 26, Kpelle, moved to West Point in 2005. No education. (July 29, 2011).

<sup>116</sup> Alieu Karh, age 42, Fula, born in West Point. High school, 10th Grade. (August 10, 2011); Morris 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011)

<sup>117</sup> Lygory, age 48, born in West Point, some college education. Interviewed (August 10, 2011).



rents rooms to three other tenants for 300 Liberian dollars (4\$US) per month. Her main source of income comes from renting the rooms, but she also sells provisional goods such as rice and soap from the front area of her home. Anita says that she stayed in West Point during the Liberian civil war because “I grew up here. I knew I couldn’t go different place so it better I stay here. When God say I die here, I die. So I stayed here and god made it okay. I was safe through the war.” Anita is proud of the business she has built in West Point and her story highlights the benefits, but also the limitations, of economic relations in the community:

If you want to sell, you can sell. As for me, now I'm making business for myself (...) The only thing is that you have to be strong to make a business. When you are strong, you can live here, but when you're lazy, you will end up going to the street to be prostitute work or stealing, but when you're strong, you don't have to look for money in West Point. You can live here.

When asked what she thought was the most important service offered in the community, Anita unhesitatingly answered “education,” referring to the primary schools in West Point. She then continued to say, “The thing we don’t have here is a high school. And only one government school, the rest you have to pay.” In talking about the future of West Point, Anita focused on the potential of people within the community:

I say that West Point got a great future. People say good things don't come from West Point, but we got people who live in West Point that now is going to university and now are teaching there—they're from West Point. They grew up in West Point, they went to high school, they went to college, and now they are teaching... We've got great people here that can do something for us. In the future, when you get out there (*Monrovia*) and say, ‘I come from West Point’, they will say ‘yes, that's true.’ West Point got potential people here.

Anita is in no way satisfied with the lack of efforts of the government in West Point, asserting that “they don’t come here unless it’s an election year.” Despite this, she talked about her political views and how they have been impacted by the changing role of women in West Point: “No matter what, I'm still staying with Ellen (*President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*). She don't do anything, but the reason why I'm stay behind her is she has made women to be part of this society now.” Anita discussed gender dynamics in the community, including problems of domestic violence and changing opinions about women’s rights:

You got men that aren't married to you. You spend 5 years together and anytime he beat you, he pull you out, you got two children, he just leave with the children. He will leave no food, nothing. But from the time Ellen got into power, they got something in place now they call "women rights". Women’s rights. That means that if a man is offending you, something can be done about it.

In the case of separation, Anita says, there is now recognition that family resources must be shared:

When a man says he don't want her (*his partner*), everything in your house you share. He will feed her until she gets a man and if he says he doesn’t want her and he has children, they (*the authorities*) will make sure to go to his working place and get to know his salary and they will share it with the woman and your children. That is one of the good things she (*Ellen*) has done.

Although there have been some institutional changes that have had a noticeable impact on attitudes and everyday life in West Point, progress can perhaps most obviously be seen through *individual acts of improvement*. Houses built initially out of zinc are changed to concrete as residents acquire resources to improve their homes: “way back, there was a lot of trash, but as time goes by, people are trying to develop their houses with concrete and tin.”<sup>118</sup> There is also pride in accomplishments. For instance, residents discussed growing up in West Point, going to school and building businesses as individual accomplishments that they were proud of: “I grew up here, went to school until I reached this far.”<sup>119</sup> Another theme was the ability of residents to improve their own lives as well as family prospects. In discussing the prevalence of cholera and malaria in the community, one resident remarked that as a parent, he teaches his children how to only drink clean water, and as a result “sicknesses catch other people’s children, but [they] don’t touch my children because I teach them, I train them. Others are following in our footsteps” (*community health initiatives*).<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, people talk about changes to the community as coming entirely through self help, with a frequent comment being that “we get everything for ourselves in West Point.”<sup>121</sup> The emphasis is on individual success, which will subsequently lead to family and community success. As one resident stated, “if you put yourself together, you yourself could be president tomorrow.”<sup>122</sup>

However, there are also community initiatives that aim to address specific challenges faced by the community. For example, the increasing number of fishing crews has meant that the “poverty rate is going down because we have a crew fishing. People go and help the fishermen in return for fish.”<sup>123</sup> This enables them to “take on some responsibility.” Discussing ideas of success and progress, people would frequently reference “high positions in government” and other agencies, as a man named Ali remarked, “if you go there (*to government offices*), you will find West Pointers.” Finally, there is an emphasis on education. When talking about the future, many residents discussed the increased willingness for children to go to school, that unlike in the past, “youth are [now] very, very willing to go to school.”<sup>124</sup> Many believe that this new emphasis on education will ultimately lead to improvements in the community; “So for now,

<sup>118</sup> Beatrice, female resident, age 64. Moved to West Point in 1968. (July 21, 2011).

<sup>119</sup> Anita, female resident, 38, resident since 1970, some high school (July 14, 2011).

<sup>120</sup> Jacob, male resident, age 48. Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

<sup>121</sup> Zebedee, male resident, age 30, Grebo. Resident since 2005. High School, Grade 10 (July 29, 2011).

<sup>122</sup> Diana, female resident, age 52, Resident since 1975. Elementary School, 6th grade (August 9, 2011).

<sup>123</sup> Morris, male resident, age 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

<sup>124</sup> Beatrice, female resident, age 18, born in West Point, high school graduate (July 21, 2011).



they are willing to go to school, so then we will have plenty of people going to school. In the future, we will have more educators here in West Point.”<sup>125</sup>

Not only are children and youth more willing to go to school, but parents are also placing more importance on finding resources to finance their children’s education. Sometimes, parents manage to do this: “there are people here who put their lives together and support their children to go to those schools”<sup>126</sup> (*referring to private Catholic and Methodist Schools, or schools in Monrovia*). However, the competition for school is now very intense and there is only one government primary school. As one resident said, “before, people were not thinking for their children to go to school (*people were not concentrating on their children’s education*), but now, it is a competition. Everyone is fighting hard for their children to go to school.”<sup>127</sup> In West Point, there are a number of private primary schools and one private junior high school. Fees are between 1000-3000 Liberian Dollars per semester, depending on the grade level and school. There is no high school and only one public primary school in West Point, servicing a population of 75 000 people. To go to high school, students must walk to schools in Monrovia. People are willing to do whatever it takes to see that their children are in school:

In West Point, we are sending our children to school. The majority of West Pointers are now going to school. Some are in university; some have gone for study abroad. So some time from now there will be changes in West Point.<sup>128</sup>

For those youth who are able to attend high school, the question remains, what opportunities are available after they graduate? The number of children and youth in the West Point community is astounding, making this an even more pressing concern. Every corner you turn in West Point, there will be groups of children or a group of young men walking together. Some never attended school, some are still in school, or involved in youth initiatives through local NGOs that encourage them to make improvements in their communities through organizing community cleanups, health awareness campaigns or events about the risks teenage pregnancy. However, when a young person does graduate, there are minimal opportunities for career or self-advancement. There is also a glaring gender disparity in educational opportunities; a high proportion of women in West Point are illiterate, though this is slowly changing and more girls are now attending school. While walking with a young woman named Beatrice who recently

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<sup>125</sup> Lygory, male resident, age 48, born in West Point, some college education (August 10, 2011).

<sup>126</sup> Jacob, male resident, age 48. Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

<sup>127</sup> Agnes, female resident, age 26 Resident since 1996, (July 5, 2011).

<sup>128</sup> Alieu Karh, male resident, age 42, Fula, born in West Point . High school, 10th Grade. (August 10, 2011).

graduated high school, I asked her about her plans for the future. She currently lives at home and works with her mother to cook and sell food, but talked extensively about her dreams of becoming a nurse. When I then asked what training was required to become a nurse, Mary said, “a college nursing course...maybe I’ll go in the future,” she continued, “but for now, I don’t have the means.”<sup>129</sup>

### 5.2.2: Women in West Point

“We’ve got something in place now called women’s rights”- Anita Jebbah<sup>130</sup>

Discourse surrounding women’s rights and protection in West Point are increasingly prevalent, in part because these issues are presently of national significance as well. During and following the Liberian civil war, there were incredibly high levels of gender based violence (GBV) against women and girls. Estimates indicate that over half of all women were victims of GBV during the war.<sup>131</sup> Prior to 2006, there were no laws against rape in Liberia. Gender based violence remains a huge concern in West Point and although rape is now an unbailable offence in Liberia, it is difficult and costly to bring a case to trial, as evidenced by the fact that only four cases have led to convictions to date.<sup>132</sup> Prostitution is also common in West Point.<sup>133</sup> As one resident asserts, “this place is bad for most of the girl children. It is a huge problem. Guys rape people's children. There are lots of teenage pregnancies: 12, 13, 14 years old [girls are] getting pregnant because of this community and because of the poverty rate, people are using their kids to go and get money for their daily bread.”<sup>134</sup> What will be discussed in this section are differences in the lived experiences of women and men in West Point as well as the changing attitudes of community members, both male and female, towards women’s rights and protection. Gender based violence (GBV) remains a significant problem in West Point. However, the following profile shows that community initiatives—implemented from the ground up—have meant that women now have more ways of gaining assistance, medical care, counseling and justice when incidents of GBV do occur.

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<sup>129</sup> Beatrice, female resident, age 18, born in West Point, high school graduate (July 21, 2011).

<sup>130</sup> Anita, female, Age 38, resident since 1970, some high school education, (July 14, 2011).

<sup>131</sup> Sirleaf, Ellen Johnson. “Liberia’s Gender Based Violence National Action Plan.” *Forced Migration Review*. (June 2006). <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR27/21.pdf>. 27.

<sup>132</sup> Passing of law was the result of pressure from the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL); Bruthus, Lois. (2006). “Zero Tolerance for Liberian Rapists.” *Forced Migration Review*. <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR27/22.pdf>.

<sup>133</sup> Sylvester S. Lamah, age 31, Commissioner, (July 7, 2011).

<sup>134</sup> Morris, age 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

### *Kulah Borbor, West Point Women for Health and Development*



**Figure 5.6: Kulah Borbor demonstrating a weaving technique**

Kulah Borbor, aged 43, moved to West Point in 1992 after fleeing intense fighting in Liberia's interior. She walked for two days with her husband and four young children until they reached Monrovia, where they settled in West Point. Kulah has been directly impacted by the consequences of inadequate access to safe drinking water in West Point. Soon after the family arrived in West Point, her husband became ill with cholera after drinking collected rainfall water (*rainfall collection is a common source of water*). Kulah brought her husband to the local health center, but the case was too severe to be handled there. By the time they reached the health center in central Monrovia, Kulah's husband had died. This event, along with general frustration at the state of health and sanitation conditions within West Point, motivated Kulah to join a local women's organization called West Point Women for Health and Development, which aims to address a number of challenges within the community including domestic and sexual violence, teenage pregnancy and health issues such as the common outbreaks of cholera and malaria. While Kulah has no formal education, she has learnt to read and write through a literacy program at the women's center.

Kulah discussed her involvement in West Point Women for Health and Development as the Gender Based Violence Specialist. West Point Women is an organization formed by 10 women who were frustrated over the increasing incidents of sexual and gender based violence in West Point. Kulah explained how the organization functions:

When there is GBV like rape, we go to the place and take the child to the hospital, we will go to the police and make sure the person is prosecuted. When there is beating, men beating women, we will make sure women and men know that beating is not good for women because you become old before your time (*women become ill when subjected to domestic violence*). We tell them not to accept beatings from men, that love is not expressed through beating and they should not accept it. The organization, and our work with gender based violence, started with the rape of one girl. Three men raped one girl. During that time we used to have workshops run by the Ministry of Gender and we saw the need to have training on issues related to GBV. The Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) went there, to the Ministry of Gender and to the court house and brought workshops to West Point on rape. They trained about 500 West Point citizens and after that training, we went for counseling training. When women and children come to us, we counsel them and from there sometimes we go to the police and ensure that they follow up with the case. Unfortunately, that girl from the first case, the one who was raped, she got AIDS and she died. The rape happened in 2005 and she died in 2010. From that time, we have been working in the community. International NGOs come and train us.

Kulah referenced the high level of crime in West Point and the need for women to know their rights in explaining her reasons for involvement:

As you see, the criminal rate is too high in West Point. People used to be afraid to come in West Point. Even the women themselves, sometimes the rogue bust the door and have the woman (*thieves would come and rape women*). Sometimes the men, they just rape the small, small children. And you know when day break, you go to the police station and all the police station would be so pack (*so busy*). So we the women, we started going there after 2005 when Ellen became president, we started going up there (*to Monrovia/ the Ministry of Justice*). That's the time we started knowing that women are important. We got up there, we started learning skills training, about GBV, we started knowing our rights, and we started to know that we need to go to school, that it's not late for us to go to school. So we came back and we started putting ourselves together so our community could carry on the good things so that our children, our women, our sisters could get the benefits too.

Furthermore, Kulah discussed the changing perception of GBV in the community:

When they raped one girl in 2005, our people were blind to the rape incident. We didn't even know that when someone rape, they got infect (*Sexually Transmitted Infections*). We didn't know. But after that, went in workshop, got to know that through rape, you can get AIDS and through rape, you can born (*become pregnant*) and through rape, you can damage as a woman. So after that, we said 'no, we shouldn't keep it to ourselves' so we started doing awareness in the community. It made the other women to know that when someone rapes your children, it can't be secret, carry your child to hospital for better treatment because through that rape, the child can get AIDS and the child can die from it. So we decided to do awareness.

When meeting with groups of members of the women's organization, the women discussed changes that are evident as a result of the organization's work:

Before the war, women never knew where they were standing in the sense that we didn't know our rights. Men would beat women, throw out all of their stuff. They had no inheritance rights. When the man died, they would just be thrown out with their children. After Ellen came into government, people started talking about rights, about women's rights. Different groups started to advocate for women's rights, such as the International Rescue Committee (NRC), the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL), the lawyers group, started work on the inheritance law and they got together to start discussing the rights of women and children.

Furthermore, through the women's efforts, the working fees of 300 LD (5US\$) that were once required by the police before a woman could report a case of GBV have been eliminated, but only when the women's center reports a case:

If we go to the police, they don't ask for a working fee, it is free because they know that we have received specialized training in GBV and they know they shouldn't ask for money (...) Also, beatings have been minimized; women are not depending on men, the women are now looking for their own money, they are working for themselves.

The organization has grown from 10 to 115 members and is financed by membership dues (10LD) collected at weekly meetings:

When we started, we were 10 women with a vision. Then other women started seeing us and coming in. When men beat women, the women come in and we council them. Sometimes the

men come in too and we council them as well. We find ways for the family to work to solve their problems and for the women to see that the treatment is not okay. When there are cases of rape, we take the victim to the hospital and follow up with the police to make sure the person is prosecuted.

The weaknesses in Liberia's justice system have tangible effects in West Point. As Kulah explained, "we got some cases to the court, carry some perpetrators in jail, but some of the cases they throw out because of no evidence, but still, some are still there. So those are the things we do in the community as women."

The organization has also given scholarships to women and girls to encourage them to attend school:

In 2008, through the help of the help of AFELL, we helped the rape victims, 22 students, get scholarships for elementary school, but now the grant is over so the women's organization took over, but didn't have funding so we started supporting 10 children. One child's school is about 150US per year. This is the private school, not the public because when we go to the public school, they say there is no space. We also supported 8 teenage mothers to go back to school last year because when they have babies, they often have to drop out and do not go back.

In addition, literacy classes are held and some women learn how to sew. The impact of this, the women say, is that "today they sew; they earn money and open their own bank account. Some women learnt how to weave clothes and started making money and sending their children to school. And some women, some in their 40s, started going to school and we see differences. When your child comes from school, you are able to look at your child's copy book and know that they are doing well in school. These are the differences that are coming in our lives." The significance of Liberia having a female president was also discussed:

When a woman became president, we said "ah", women can become doctors, women can be drivers, women can be carpenters, women can be mechanics. So through that, we said 'no, we need to do something and someone can't come and do it for you.' You will rise up and do it for yourself.

The importance and potential of community driven initiative in West Point must be understood in order to provide appropriate and sustained support to organizations like West Point Women for Health and Development. In terms of challenges, Kulah says that the organization is "sometimes overwhelmed by the amount of work" they face. For example, she explained:

When cholera was everywhere (*which happens every rainy season*) people would knock on the house doors of the women's organization members in the middle of the night to try to get treatment. We would sometimes find 100 people dead of cholera and it is only this rain season that we have not found this because we have been raising awareness about the importance of chlorinating water (with Water Guard). Now the problem has changed from cholera to Mosquitoes (*malaria*) because of all the water.

A common theme that emerged while spending time with the organization was the existence of a breaking point—a point where the women became so outraged by the abuse

women and girls in their community were facing that they organized to demand changes at a local and national level.

It is also important to obtain a male's perspective of women's rights in the community. One male resident said:

The women in West Point are more than the men and as society grows, society changes. Before then, the women were very submissive. Now, they always want to be at the top. We just got to live with it, we just got to live with it. But equally, we (*men*) just want to be on par. Now, if you speak to any woman in West Point, they will say 'we are in power,' 'we are in power, so give us a chance.' We just live with it.

Significantly, all residents interviewed (men and women alike) discussed issues specific to women in the community; gender based violence (GBV), teenage pregnancy, prostitution and domestic abuse were among the most prevalent. While GBV remains a significant problem in West Point, the West Point Women's organization highlights the agency, organization and initiative of West Point residents to confront community problems and put pressure on local and national leaders to respond to community needs.

### *5.2.3: More people; same priorities*

The discussions presented thus far in the chapter have highlighted the need to look at West Point from the perspective of residents, answering my first and second research questions. From this view, West Point is a changing place in terms of the demographic structure of the community, the complex social relationships that exist, reciprocity and community, and evidence of progress and self-organization. It is different for men and women. In Chapter 6, the analysis will turn to my third research question: could an improved understanding of the livelihood patterns and priorities of West Point residents influence the way Liberian national and municipal governments respond to this community's challenges?

As a foundation for answering this question, it is first necessary to outline the serious structural challenges that remain in West Point, challenges that can only be met through collective action. A comparison between West Point in the late 1980s and West Point in 2011 is useful in this regard. Patton and Owusu, in their study "Low Income Settlements in Monrovia, Liberia" discuss the urban planning initiatives that were carried out between 1979 and 1985. The study, conducted by the National Housing Authority in seven communities in Monrovia, was considered to be a "major step in involving the poor in program design." The NHA investigated

the needs and priorities of communities and while statistics for West Point were not included in the study, and are not accessible through the Liberia Institute of Geo-Information Services, a comparison across three neighbourhoods (New Kru Town, Dwala and Four Points) reveal that the top four priorities of residents in all communities were public toilets, health clinics, street lighting and improved water supply. Schools were a close fifth on the priority list. The information from the surveys was used to conduct community upgrading programs, including the building of a primary school, market, four sanitation facilities, new rental housing units and roads. A significant finding was that few households indicated housing as a top priority; instead, they indicated needs that are “far beyond their ability to provide for themselves.”<sup>135</sup>

Although the ordering of priorities may have changed slightly, resident needs remain the same as they were in 1986. Residents need more public toilet facilities, they need affordable health clinics, they need more public primary schools and a high school, and they need a regular supply of clean water. Few residents mentioned housing or garbage collection as a top priority. Additional public toilet facilities were a key priority for most.<sup>136</sup> While many people discussed the toilet facility on the main road, some people expressed concerns that the 5LD charged to use it was not affordable for all. Residents described the dangers of going on the beach as well as the health concerns: “you can get cholera outbreak, diarrhea...there is no way to keep our children strong.”<sup>137</sup> People pointed to the “latrine problem” as being the most serious problem in the community. David, previously profiled, commented that “if people don’t take time, we’ll get an outbreak of cholera...I’ve seen the water flowing to where we fish.” The absence of an affordable, accessible health clinic was another predominant priority. The frequency of illness, along with the challenge of transporting people to hospital has resulted in residents pooling money together to charter a taxi to transport someone to a hospital in town, or at times resorting to “taking people to the hospital in wheelbarrow.”<sup>138</sup> Lastly, contaminated water or salty water due to West Point’s proximity to the ocean was also a concern and people normally buy water or collect rainwater: “now that it's rainy season, people are buying water because some people

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<sup>135</sup> Lacey, Linda and Owusu, Stephen. (1988). “Low Income Settlements in Monrovia, Liberia” 227.

<sup>136</sup> Sylvester S. Lahmah, age 31, Commissioner of West Point, said the following while discussing toilet facilities: “People use the beaches to defecate. Since we (*town Council*) took over, we have been sending SOS calls to our international partners that the construction of more latrines is necessary in the West Point” (July 7, 2011).

<sup>137</sup> Agnes, female resident, age 26, resident since 1996, no education (July 5, 2011)

<sup>138</sup> Commissioner and residents all mentioned inaccessibility of health center: “there is no ambulance service in West Point. People have to charter taxis that cost about 20US-30USD and the majority of people survive on less than a dollar a day.”(S. Lahmah, Commissioner, July 7, 2011)

messaging (*contaminating*) with well water and it gives you diarrhea so we usually have to know who we buying our drinking water from.”<sup>139</sup>

The secondary priority for many residents was the need for the government to build more public primary schools. The Sirleaf Government enacted a “Free and Compulsory Primary Education Policy,” but since then, residents say that “there are not even schools to cover the situation” in West Point. It is very difficult for parents to find a place for their children in the government schools so many are forced to come up with the school fees necessary to send their children to private school and many families consequently cannot afford to send their children to school:

If you start from to where West Point started and where West Point ends, there is only one public school, one public school and that school has been operating for the past 30 years. So it's embarrassing parents because after their child graduates from elementary, then you have to be looking for money all around to send that child to private school. So if you don't have that money, it means that the child will stay because most of the people here depend on the Atlantic Ocean for survival. And if John Brown goes to sea, if he doesn't get fish for one month, it means that his family will not eat and if they are not eating, the child will not go to school. So if government could bring in more public schools, then of course, we will make progress.<sup>140</sup>

An emerging concern for many residents on the “beach side” of West Point is the problem of erosion. With increasing regularity, large waves crash onto the beach, destroying and flooding many homes. When I first met with Jacob Johnson, he had just finished repairing his house after a large wave had flooded their room in the middle of the night: “when the sea comes fast, it can come anywhere and break houses.” Another resident said that “the sea comes and takes the place (*the house*). When there is the erosion, the erosion come and take the place down.”<sup>141</sup> As a result of erosion, people are moving from the beach side. However, some residents are benefiting from the erosion problem; a homeowner described the higher number of tenants he has as a consequence of erosion: “the sea damaged many houses so people are displaced. You see in this house, there are many children. The place is jam packed because of all the displacement of people from the seaside.”<sup>142</sup> Lacey and Owusu’s observations were made when the population of

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<sup>139</sup> David, age 47, Sapo tribe, resident since 1991, high school graduate (July 12, 2011).

<sup>140</sup> Lygory age 48, born in West Point, some college education (August 10, 2011).

<sup>141</sup> Zebedee, Age 30, Grebo. Resident since 2005. High School, Grade 10 (July 29, 2011).

<sup>142</sup> Alieu Karh, Male, 42, Fula, born in West Point . High school, 10th Grade. (August 10, 2011).



Monrovia was around 330,000.<sup>143</sup> The population of Monrovia is now 1.3 million people and the population of West Point has grown from 25,367 to between 60,000 and 80,000 inhabitants, as noted earlier. There have been no significant upgrading projects in Liberian informal settlement communities since the mid-1980s.

In this chapter, I answered my first research question, how do West Point residents view their community? It was shown that residents define the physical characteristics of the community in terms of the services and landmarks that are most important in their daily lives. Reoccurring themes included economic viability in West Point and the benefits that can come from living in close proximity to Monrovia and the sea, as well as the “sense of community” and reciprocity present in West Point. Residents also described their community in terms of evidence of progress and change, focusing on individual acts of improvement, family prospects, and changing perceptions of women’s rights. In answering research question number two, differences in the lived experiences of women and men, I discussed the clear gender disparity in women and girls’ access to education in West Point. Furthermore, gender based violence remains a significant problem in the community. Although local organizations such as West Point Women for Health and Development have made strides to address some of the most serious issues facing women and girls in West Point, the Liberian government has yet to fully accept the important role that local women’s groups could play in achieving goals of improved security and service delivery in low-income communities.

In the next Chapter, the analysis shifts to Liberian national and municipal government views of West Point. The question to be explored is could an improved understanding of the livelihood patterns and priorities of West Point residents influence the way governments and development organizations respond to this community’s challenges? To answer this question, I will outline the Liberian government’s community planning and urban policy priorities for West Point and Monrovia as a whole, and discuss how these compare to resident priorities for their own community. The Liberian government’s focus on urban “aspirations” for Monrovia rather than local needs has prevented the state from moving to address the compounding infrastructural, environmental, and health concerns faced by the West Point community.

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<sup>143</sup> Lacey, Linda and Owusu, Stephen. (1988). “Low Income Settlements in Monrovia, Liberia” in *Spontaneous Shelter: International Perspectives and Prospects*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 219.

## CHAPTER 6: POWER AND PLACE: THE GOVERNMENT AND WEST POINT

“They (*the government*) view West Point as a slum area so the immediate assistance that is supposed to come to West Point. It doesn’t. The government always stands back on West Point.”- Alieu Karh, Resident

### 6.1: Unless it’s an Election Year

There are at present no definitive plans in place for relocating people from the West Point area. However, residents discussed rumours that have been circulating about government plans for relocating West Point and the preconditions that they say are necessary in order for any relocation plan to be acceptable and successful. When West Pointers discussed government plans for the West Point community, the emphasis was on the government’s goals of “esteeming the area,” and improving the aesthetics of the coast, not providing more assistance to residents or improved access to essential services. As one resident asserts, “people say that they will take West Point from here. Ellen say she take West Point from here because they want to use the port to esteem here.”<sup>144</sup> Other residents pointed to erosion as the reason the government is trying to relocate people. A common theme seemed to be that “development,” which is most often used in reference to sanitation facilities, health centers and schools, does not occur in West Point because the government is considering relocating the community. However, government officials emphasized that any prospective plans for moving people out of the community will be preceded by consultation with community members and leaders, and extensive environmental studies. An important question is therefore, what impacts do municipal and national governments currently have in West Point?

It is necessary to examine the ways in which government presence is felt in West Point. The Monrovia City Corporation (MCC) does not have jurisdiction in the Township of West Point. West Point has a local town council, headed by a commissioner who is appointed by the President. Leaving aside the physical changes that can be seen in the community since the election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, including paving the main road, building two market areas, one public restroom facility and repairing a soccer stadium, people remain frustrated by a lack of government investment in the community. Residents made statements such as “the government doesn’t come here unless it is an election year”; “they have not done anything extra for the people to feel. The community needs a health center”; “governments

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<sup>144</sup> Beatrice, age 60, born in West Point. No education. (July 21, 2011).

come, governments go. They have not done things that will affect the people's lives; they're only concerned with themselves." One woman articulated her frustration over the absence of government in the community by stating, "They will say 'we promise we will build a toilet for you, we will bring in a playground for the children, we will bring rest, we will bring water.' They will say all of these things, but right after the election, you can't find any of those things here."<sup>145</sup> When discussing changes in the community as a result of government action, the dominant answer was declining crime rates because of increased security and improved lighting along the main road. There is a clear connection between declining crime rate and community improvement: "the crime rate is now going down, so improvement coming to the community now."<sup>146</sup> A declining crime rate has led to an increase in the number of international aid agencies and NGOs in West Point as organizations, including Save the Children, OXFAM and Right To Play International, are now more willing to set up programs in West Point.

Resident reactions to the idea of relocation are not unified. Many people prefaced discussions about government plans with statements like "if government says we should move, we will move." They referred to the tenuous land tenure situation in West Point, clearly acknowledging that West Point land is government land: "everyone that is here is squatting so the government has the right to say 'no'."<sup>147</sup> There is an obvious need for quantitative studies to be conducted in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of resident attitudes towards relocation. That said, residents interviewed for this thesis expressed concern that their businesses and livelihoods would be irreparably disrupted by any attempts to relocate residents: "It will be a very hectic thing because one third of the population depends on the Atlantic Ocean for their survival and they too have dependents"; "Those that have booming businesses here will not like it. If they go and start a new life, they will be thinking about the business they were making here. What they (*the fishermen/ businesspeople*) made here will not make it to the other side."<sup>148</sup> An additional concern was that residents would be unable to support themselves or their families because "living elsewhere [would] be more expensive." This, along with family history in the community appears to be a primary factor in shaping the opinions of residents who are not in

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<sup>145</sup> Diana, age 52, Resident since 1975. Elementary School, 6th grade (August 9, 2011).

<sup>146</sup> Jacob, age 48, Grebo Tribe. Resident since 1980. Some high school (July 5, 2011).

<sup>147</sup> David, age 47, sapo tribe, moved to West Point in 1991, high school graduate (July 12, 2011).

<sup>148</sup> Lygory, age 48, born in West Point, some college education (August 10, 2011); David (July 12, 2011).

favor of relocation: “for me, I would prefer 100 percent to stay here because I feel the living condition is a little bit cheaper.”<sup>149</sup>

Challenges of maintaining the current structures of reciprocity, community, and economy contribute to doubt amongst community members that a plan for relocation would be successful. In one informal group discussion, a female resident expressed that “it can’t work. Before the 2005 election, we were told by the government that when they ascend to power, they were going to do good things for West Point. On the opposite side, they want to evacuate us from here, to take us from here and carry us to a different place. And it can’t work.”<sup>150</sup> Surprisingly, some people spoke positively about the potential for West Point to be a prime location for business and tourism and their desire to see urban renewal occur, if appropriate provisions are made for West Pointers. In all cases, residents were very vocal about the preconditions that would need to be in place before relocation could occur: “you can’t relocate people if you don’t have a place for them”; “Some people agree, but they ask, ‘where will we go?’”; “They’ve got to get a place for us before they can move us from here”; “What I envision is that when government makes up plans to evacuate us from here, there must be a place they will carry us and take care of us.”<sup>151</sup> A prevalent theme was that the status of West Point as a slum area, combined with the impending prospect of relocation, has prevented the Liberian government from bringing assistance to West Point: “Governments always have in mind to have West Point sold; they want to commercialize this place. So they don’t have in mind to bring any assistance here because they want to give the place to foreign nationals or tourists.”<sup>152</sup>

## **6.2: The Long, Hot Summer**

“You see, sometimes you don’t need a lot of money, you just need the cooperation of the community, a few things here or there.”- Mary Broh, Mayor of Monrovia

In order to examine state policies towards West Point, and how these impact the everyday lives of West Pointers, it is necessary to understand the broader urban and governance environment that West Point is situated in. Within three months of living in Monrovia, there were very visible changes in the urban landscape: street lines and curbs were painted, road signs were put in place,

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<sup>149</sup> Morris, male resident, age 31, Kru, resident since 2008. Some high school (August 5, 2011).

<sup>150</sup> Female resident, age 24, resident since 2005, some high school (July 23, 2011).

<sup>151</sup> Beatrice; Jacob; David; Lygory.

<sup>152</sup> Lygory, age 48, born in West Point, some college education (August 10, 2011).

one way road systems were marked, a parking system was introduced, a new city cleaning company was contracted, initiatives for trash collection were introduced, to name only a few. The interviews presented below highlight the priorities of municipal and national government officials and their plans for slum communities in Monrovia. As discussed in the conceptual framework, the reduced legibility of slums can be seen as creating problems for states' attempts to organize cities and control populations.<sup>153</sup> Informal settlements are perceived by governments to be containers for crime, growth of the informal economy, social ills and general disorder. Yet there is simultaneously recognition of the need to work at a grassroots community level to realize positive and sustainable community change.

### 6.2.1: African Urban Ideals

Liberians have nicknamed her “Sledgehammer Lady”, “Mary Break-It” and “Mary Burn-it.” The President once called her “General Broh!”<sup>154</sup> Evidently, the Mayor of Monrovia, Mary Broh, is a controversial public figure in Liberia due to her hands-on approach to “cleaning up” Monrovia. She was appointed in 2009 by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and had previously lived in the United States for 33 years, returning after the civil war had ended. Broh is perhaps best known for her “clean and green agenda” and her emphasis on city order, formality and regulation (see Figure 6.1). While she stresses the need to work with local communities to achieve her sanitation goals, Broh has a definite vision for changing Monrovia’s urban landscape, a vision which has clearly been influenced by American urbanism as well as a recent trip to Rwanda. In describing what makes a model African city, Broh referenced Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, and commented:



Figure 6.1: Tricycle used for door to door waste collection. Part of the municipality’s Community Based Enterprise (CBE) program (credit: Monrovia City Corporation)

Kigali is a clean city... when I got there, I was pleasantly surprised. I was overwhelmed by this feeling that, ‘my goodness, it’s a Garden of Eden!’ Good landscaping, good manners, people are working hard, especially the waste management. I saw the street cleaners, the street sweepers. I was looking for dirt everywhere, I couldn’t find any.

<sup>153</sup> Scott, James C.(1998). *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.44.

<sup>154</sup> Mala, Clara. (July 28, 2011).“What’s Next for Mayor Broh? Can She Transform Monrovia into a Clean Urban City?” *Front Page Africa*. <http://www.newnarratives.org/stories/927/>.

Kigali has interesting Parallels to Monrovia due to the internal conflicts that both experienced and Broh stresses the need for Liberians to “get out of that whole excuse of we're just coming out of war, we are traumatized and all of that. I think we should pick ourselves up by our bootstraps and try to do something to move the city forward.” When asked why she considers Kigali to be a model African city, Broh remarked:

It's about culture; it's about just moral cultural values. And they (*Rwandans*) all get together for nation and the nation first. It's Rwanda first and then you do everything in your capacity to make things work. So everything seems to fit in. You know, it's a city among hills. And so you either go up or you come down. And as you go up, you see good stuff: beautiful landscape, and as you are coming down, you see people going about their work, doing their business, being regulated. Everybody is doing his or her own work that conforms into the national policy and the cities other policy. You are not going to see dirt anywhere; you are not going to be a street vender just anywhere. You know where you are supposed to be if you're a bike rider, if you're a motorcyclist. You're supposed to have a number and be in a database that the city can identify. I mean, you're talking about a structured city.

This approach to community planning, which focuses on urban aspirations, can be called a *city ideal*. These models of city development are influenced by priorities of order, environmental cleanup, sanitation, and aesthetic appeal. While the Mayor focused on cleanliness and order, national government officials primarily discussed the gentrification of the waterfront, referencing harbor projects in Maryland: “It used to be something like that, not our type of slum, but it used to be something like that before and it was transformed into something like this (*showing a 2009 draft plan for waterfront renewal*).”<sup>155</sup>

The Mayor's priorities emphasize conforming to national policies. She argues that "cities should function like cities," and refers to American cities like Savannah, Georgia and New York in describing public spaces she would like to emulate. An infamous policy she has implemented is called "First Saturday," which involves her and her staff touring the city to inspect people's businesses and homes. If people are outside, they are expected to be "greening their space." Businesses as well as private homes are expected to keep surrounding environments “clean and green,” or pay a fine. Structures or buildings that have not been approved by MCC or the Ministry of Public Works are marked with a spray painted x, which signifies that the building will soon be demolished. At other times, crews from city hall or Mary Broh herself will simply knock down "informal" businesses on the spot. Mayor Broh believes that by "imposing rules in

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with Elijah Conley, Assistant Minister of Planning. (August 10, 2011).

communities," people will begin to "adhere to the city's urban agenda and urban policies." These policies will ensure that people understand that "they have to clean their surroundings. It is very important to control your own environment and be environmentally friendly. Do not pollute the environment. The swamp is not your wasteland. Don't dump any garbage in there. You have to clean your surroundings." The Mayor specified that "street vending is a challenge for me right now. People just don't understand that they cannot just go and sell things anywhere. But we are working on that, setting up some rules, some ordinances." Priority number one is sanitation: "we are lacking good sanitation, which I am really grappling with." The mayor's major project is public restrooms, which would involve "building some modern facilities that will get cleaned." "People will flock to City Hall to use the restroom," she continued.

To spread her message about a clean environment to children and families, Broh has introduced a marketing campaign that uses a pigmy hippo mascot family called "the Dukor family" (Figure 6.2). The father is the head of home and "does not like dirt," the mother "likes cleaning" and is a market woman, and the bigger sister "follows orders." Municipal urban policies emphasize cleanliness as being a precondition for enjoying the city: "you need a clean environment to sit. Parks, river fronts, bicycle paths, promenades. Young people and even the older generation should enjoy a regular city life." Broh is also committed to training young people and providing income generating activities for youth. This is achieved through outsourcing city projects like the building of sanitation units and waste collection. These projects "are making sure young people are trained, we're talking about capacity building and they're making sure that they earn their own income."



**Figure 6.2: A poster of the "Dukor Family": pigmy hippo mascots created as part of a Monrovia City Hall cleanup campaign.**

#### *6.2.2: Current Urban Planning Strategies and Priorities*

"In the same way as the slum conditions spread like cancer and keep spreading, in the same way we take the revitalization condition block by block. We kill the cancer instead of waiting for billions of dollars and a master plan strategy for Monrovia."- Elijah Conley, Zoning Commissioner

Much of the discussion with Ministry of Public Works (MPW) officials revolved around the approaches currently adopted by the government, plans for the future, and constraints they are facing in regards to community planning in Liberia. The approach discussed by the Assistant Minister for Planning and the Zoning Commissioners is called “Block by Block Initiative,” which entails planning and often clearing one area, street, or stretch of the coast at a time. Ambiguity of land tenure laws in Liberia has made the job of MPW officials particularly challenging; a land commission has been established to begin addressing land rights disputes, but “it has its work cut out for it.”<sup>156</sup> The water front area and Waterside in particular, has been identified as a priority area by the President and MPW.<sup>157</sup> Although plans for West Point were not immediately discussed, the proximity of West Point to the Waterside area and the government’s long-term objectives of relocating slum areas and gentrifying the waterfront entirely suggest that their gradual approach to slum clearance may eventually extend to the West Point area. In discussing plans for the waterside area, the Assistant Minister of Planning remarked:

One of the projects we are privy to is the water front project along the Waterside area. That place is used for people to defecate, throw their refuse etc, etc. The president has said that the whole area should be cleared, from the new bridge all the way to what they call 12th street and reconditioned, both sides of the waterfront and make it more picturesque and more livable. Build rides and other kind of stuff, have a boat that people can pay for it to ride up and down the river.

This plan is part of the “Relocation Action Plan,” which has begun with the clearing of an area near the Mesurado Bridge. The tactics described by the Minister essentially involve settling multiple land rights claims by compensating people for their assets so that areas currently occupied by squatters can be used for businesses and other urban upgrading projects. The problem with this, the Minister states, is “after we pay these people off, we need to move fast to build the area, otherwise they’ll come back.”

### *6.2.3: Governance Challenges and the Road Ahead*

“Relocation will be a long road...as we call it, a long, hot summer.”- Mary Broh, Mayor of Monrovia

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<sup>156</sup> Mary Broh. Personal Interview. Monrovia City Hall. (August 12, 2011).

<sup>157</sup> Waterside is the traditional commercial area and shopping district. The different portions of Waterside include the area between the two bridges, the slipway on the right side and the West Point area on the left. The area popularly known as Waterside is between the Mesurado Bridge and United Nations Drive. See Map in Appendix A.



As previously mentioned, Monrovia is by far the largest city in Liberia, housing over a third of the population. The city is also the center for government and as such, the municipality and the Liberian Government must collaborate to address common urban problems and devise a collective urban vision. The mayor expressed that “along with the National Government, Public Works, we are all working together, setting up parking spaces, we are going to try to set up and outsource some of these services. Parking garages, parking spaces, green spaces, the bridge is now being restored.” Broh articulates a grand vision for what Monrovia should look like:

We are going to make sure we have pedestrian only streets. There's a block, take a block and say pedestrian only, we do some beautiful potted plants and stuff like that, trees, and people go in and out of the shops, tile sidewalks. You sit, have a sandwich. You know a food court, that sort of thing.

However, the Minister of Planning and zoning commissioners discussed institutional collaboration with more hesitancy and outlined the problems that stand in the way of creating and implementing the urban upgrading projects: “We need a clear understanding of what steps to take and what agency is responsible for what,” the Minister explained. There are also resource and situational constraints:

Well, with Monrovia, we're experiencing very difficult times right now. Most of the work we want to do, what we really want to do is difficult, especially when you want to transform an area where people live. What do you do with the people there? It's difficult. There's no real housing program in Liberia.<sup>158</sup>

Like any capital city, Monrovia is dynamic. The city has changed rapidly since the end of the civil war in 2003. This has created problems for city planners: “things are always changing. You get so frustrated because you can have great plans and no implementation.”<sup>159</sup>

The political sensitivity of urban renewal is another pertinent consideration, particularly throughout the 2011 Presidential election season. Government officials stressed that “it's a political season. In the political season, there are some things you can do (*small gentrification projects*), and some things you can't do (*clear large urban areas*). So you slow down a little on that and see how things go. We are in a critical period, you know.” This could suggest that in the post-election period, the pace may begin to quicken on larger scale urban renewal projects such as the Relocation Action Plan. Again, the emphasis of Ministry of Public Works officials was on the long term visions for Monrovia and the challenges with immediate plans for improvement.

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<sup>158</sup> Elijah Conley, Lead Zoning Commissioner. Personal Interview. (August 11, 2011).

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

There are capacity problems, such as the desire to outsource to Liberian companies that do not have the technical skills, experience, or expertise to spearhead a large-scale project:

A lot of it boils down to a capacity problem. We work with Chinese companies and one Ivorian company and that's it. But the local companies are not really delivering. The government is trying to Liberianize some of the projects, spread some money around. But at the same time, the people you try to hire, most of them can't really do the work. They have the equipment, but can't do it. So what do you do? You go back to the international companies.<sup>160</sup>

Finally, there is the important issue of identifying the beneficiaries of the Relocation Action Plan and examining why past attempts at “spreading out” Monrovia’s population have failed. Mayor Broh expressed that she would like to see the city’s population “spread out” to areas to the north and west of Monrovia, such as Paynesville City, Caldwell Township, and Louisiana Township: “we can at least spread out for people to enjoy, be on the riverside, build on the riverfront, enjoy it and go into the other townships, which are still not populated much.” Yet residents of West Point explicitly stated that Paynesville and Caldwell do not have the amenities, namely proximity to Monrovia and the coast, that make life in the city possible. Furthermore, the mayor seemed perplexed as to why a government plan from two years ago that attempted to give 5 acres of land for free to anyone who agreed to move back to the country was unsuccessful: “So when I ask people, “why don't you take advantage of this offer?” They say, ‘where will my kids go to school? No schools over there’ ... But there are schools that they are building in those communities, in those counties and villages. So the excuse is very poor.” There is clearly little understanding at the municipal level about what makes a city livable and a livelihood, sustainable. Beyond sanitation, the government does not seem to be considering the public good. Officials do not talk about urban upgrading in relation to improving people’s lives. For instance, erosion was never mentioned in interviews or informal conversations, despite this being a huge concern for residents of West Point. Nevertheless, the government has a clear vision for how the relocation process will unfold:

We gentrified a little area, an area at a time. So the water front, we take an area and say “ok folks, this is what we're trying to do, and we show them the plan”. You know we're going to get consultants in; we're not just going to drive them out. We show them, this is how this place will be if you move away and we compensate you and you can even come back and ride your bikes on the path. We're going to have some kiosks. And you can enjoy the waterfront...we'll do that in phases. When we get some money, 100k, we look

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

at all the structures, bring all the people into town hall meetings, explain to them why you are doing this and then get them to appraise the land, to appraise their property, whatever property it is. Whether it's private property or it is government land that you are on, we will do it community by community, phase by phase because funding is very scarce, the resources are scarce. So it's a long haul, it's going to take another 10, 15, 20 years, but we will do our best.<sup>161</sup>

There is an understanding amongst government officials that “people have to be relocated,” but that “if you relocate a group of people, you also have to make sure you put them in a setting where there will be schools, clinics, roads, businesses and jobs.”<sup>162</sup> However, there is a clear disconnect between the governments’ urban aspirations and their commitment to addressing current and impending urban problems that affect the everyday lives of residents. Government plans that emphasize the creation of picturesque public spaces appeal to singular ideas of urban order and form. Furthermore, they fail to see the importance of urban design strategies and policies that consider *public use* of urban space. It is this particular use of space that enables many of Monrovia’s urban poor to live, to raise families, to build businesses. Sustainable community development will require that the municipality and national government take into account user needs and priorities first when deciding where and how to allocate scarce government resources. “Block by block” initiatives cannot simply be a step-by-step process towards a grand urban vision, but must first address the immediate needs of residents and consider how these needs can be met as an integral part of community planning in Monrovia.

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<sup>161</sup> Mary Broh. Personal Interview. Monrovia City Hall. (August 12, 2011).

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

## **CHAPTER 7: “A GREAT FUTURE”: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In 5 or 10 years from now, West Point will be a great township...We will erase the negative perceptions that people have; they will no longer ask, ‘can any good come from West Point?’- Sylvester Lamah, West Point Commissioner<sup>163</sup>

The aim of this thesis was to add to the limited body of academic and development literature about Liberian slum communities, and to address the knowledge gap about community planning and development in West Point. Through weaving together individual stories and resident voices, the thesis has explored how West Point residents view their community in terms of its physical characteristics, economic, social and community relations, ideas of progress, as well as differences between the lived experiences of women and men. A comparison of government and resident views of West Point revealed that state priorities for urban development focus on aesthetic change, formality, and long-term plans for urban transformation at the expense of responding to the urgent and impending challenges facing Liberia’s urban poor. Government rhetoric about the complexity of land tenure agreements and the uncertain future of Liberian informal settlement communities cannot be used by the state as justification for inaction in slum communities. By contrasting resident and government perceptions of West Point, the thesis has highlighted the need to implement planning and development programs that concentrate on resident priorities for their own community. Government plans for Liberian informal settlement communities must focus on utilizing local knowledge, integrating existing social structures and community initiatives, and incorporating community expertise in order to provide sustainable and appropriate assistance to the West Point community.

### **7.1: Recommendations for Future Research**

This thesis provides a baseline study to inform future research in Liberian informal settlements. There is an obvious need for complementary quantitative research to be conducted in West Point and other Liberian informal settlements in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of community needs and priorities. Such research should include environmental and land use studies as well as the collection of basic demographic and economic statistical data. There is also a need for improved access to information and data once it is collected. In addition, there is currently no detailed map of the West Point area. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), in

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with Sylvester S. Lamah, Commissioner of West Point, age 31, moved to West Point in 1998. (July 7, 2011).

partnership with the Liberian Institute of Geo-Information Services and community members, can spearhead a mapping project that would create user generated maps of West Point.<sup>164</sup> Lastly, it would be advantageous to expand the data contained here and conduct similar research with children and youth in West Point.<sup>165</sup> Potential questions to be explored are: how do children and youth who live in West Point view their community? How do youth discuss their childhoods in West Point, community challenges, and ideas for their futures and the future of the community? How do these views differ from the views of adult residents?

## **7.2: Towards a Revised Block by Block Approach**

The Liberian government's urban planning strategy of "block by block initiatives" must focus on addressing local needs and priorities in low-income communities in order for the government's long term plans for urban renewal to be feasible. Outlined below are general recommendations for state and non-state involvement in West Point. These recommendations are meant to serve as a starting point for further discussion and to encourage more rapid responses by government and development officials to some of the West Point's most pressing challenges.

### **I) Women's Rights and Protection**

Enhanced and sustained support for grassroots women's organizations in West Point is essential. Organizations such as West Point Women for Health and Development rely on weekly donations from members. Liberian government ministries, particularly the Ministry of Gender and Development, needs to renew its commitment to local women's organizations and determine how best it can support women's groups to continue to build and expand their programs. At the national level, there needs to be a shift in the discourse surrounding women's rights and protection to include protection at the community level, not just the national level.

Furthermore, the government must introduce formal monitoring systems to ensure that all police working fees are eliminated for cases involving GBV, domestic abuse, and child abuse.

There should also be an expansion of the all-female police units that have been established in police stations throughout Liberia; a female police unit should be introduced at the West Point police station.

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<sup>164</sup> For example, a recent project called "Map Kibera" was started in a Nairobi slum. The project has used local youth and handheld GPS technology to produce an open source digital map of the entire area. [www.mapkibera.org](http://www.mapkibera.org).

## II) Youth and Education

West Point must be a beneficiary of the Sirleaf Government's Free and Compulsory Primary Education Policy. In order for the policy to be truly inclusive and successful, it must make public primary education accessible and affordable to children in West Point. This would involve building a minimum of one additional public primary school in West Point. Secondary and tertiary education should also become more accessible to children in West Point. This could be accomplished through the introduction of a loan or grant program to allow children in West Point, and particularly girls, to attend high school. Additionally, support should be provided for students interested in pursuing post-secondary education in medical training courses such as nursing, with the stipulation that students return to West Point after graduation to work in community health for a predetermined amount of time.

## III) Health and Sanitation

Urgent improvements must be made to the financial accessibility of malaria and cholera medication by subsidizing medication and treatment at the local health center in West Point. Immediate improvements must also be made to accessibility and affordability of health services in general, but specifically maternal care at the local health center. A starting point could be integrating information about urban healthcare access into urban policy objectives and developing a program that trains residents to be community health workers who could provide basic treatment and better inform residents about serious health and sanitation issues such as cholera and malaria as well as maternal health problems, teenage pregnancy, and GBV. In addition, affordable drinking water and/or water purification systems must become more accessible in West Point.<sup>166</sup>

Sanitation projects should start in low-income communities, not at Monrovia City Hall. The construction of additional public bathroom facilities in West Point should be prioritized. Furthermore, steps to address health and sanitation problems in West Point must include sensitizing leaders, particularly the West Point town council and police force, to the realities of gender based violence in West Point. Finally, community problems should be tackled through partnerships between multiple community stakeholders, including residents, government

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<sup>166</sup> Primary purification system used is Water Guard (PSI distributes), residents can purchase Water Guard at local pharmacies for 40LD (0.60US\$), but supply is not always available and people still lack awareness about how to use the product.

ministries, and development organizations, and strategic plans for West Point must utilize local knowledge and work with established community structures and organizations.

Nearly a decade after the end of Liberia's civil war, there is a need to reflect on the trajectory of urban renewal and gentrification processes in Monrovia to date. Theories and concepts of urban order have been used by the Liberian state as the basis for development and planning programs that attempt to address the needs of expanding Liberian communities. However, these policies, through their inability to engage in a deeper level of inquiry with the residents of informal settlements, have the effect of validating preconceived notions of slum settlements and dominant images of the sprawling, chaotic developing city. In the case of West Point, these images hide evidence of economic viability, progress, and pride of place within the community. They also mask the human side of the problems that West Pointers are experiencing, including the impacts that inadequate sanitation, education and healthcare facilities, as well as insufficient protection for women and girls, has on the lived experiences of residents. In order to realize broader urban aspirations for Monrovia, there must be a renewed commitment by both state and non-state actors to understanding community needs and priorities and determining how these needs can be met as a central part of Liberia's urban development goals.

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## Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Approval for Interviews



**Research Ethics Board Office**  
James Administration Bldg, room 429  
845 Sherbrooke St West  
Montreal, QC H3A 2T5

Tel: (514) 398-6831  
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Ethics website: [www.mcgill.ca/research/researchers/compliance/human/](http://www.mcgill.ca/research/researchers/compliance/human/)

### **Research Ethics Board I Certificate of Ethical Acceptability of Research Involving Humans**

**REB File #:** 44-0611

**Project Title:** Images of Informal Settlements: Exploring Sense of Place in West Point, Liberia


**Principal Investigator:** Wren Laing

**Department:** Geography

**Student Status:** Undergraduate Student

**Supervisor:** Prof. N. Ross

This project was reviewed on July 5, 2011 by delegated review.

  
for Sarah Turner, Ph.D.  
Delegated Reviewer, REB I

**Approval Period:** July 5, 2011 to Dec 31, 2011

This project was reviewed and approved in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects and with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

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- \* All research involving human participants requires review on an annual basis. A Request for Renewal form should be submitted 2-3 weeks before the above expiry date.
  - \* When a project has been completed or terminated a Study Closure form must be submitted.
  - \* Should any modification or other unanticipated development occur before the next required review, the REB must be informed and any modification can't be initiated until approval is received.

## Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

### Place, Gender and Development in West Point, Liberia

*Wren Laing, McGill University*

I am a student at McGill University and I am conducting interviews for my Honours Undergraduate Thesis in Geography. I am studying sense of place in informal settlements in Liberia in order to gain a better understanding of the connections people have to the places they live.

During this study, you will be asked to discuss your community, including when, how and the reasons you have settled here and to discuss any opinions you may have about it. This interview was designed to be approximately a half hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. If there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

All the information will be kept confidential. Only myself and the faculty supervisor mentioned below will have access to this information. Upon completion of this project, all data will be destroyed or stored in a secure location.

Do you consent to having your name and photo included in this report? Yes ☐ No ☐

#### Purpose and Benefits of the Research:

- The purpose of the research is to acquire a better understanding of how residents of West Point view their community and gain a better understanding of sense of the place in the community.
- Potential benefits: resident opinions will be highlighted, particularly in reference to challenges the community is facing and hopes for the future. These opinions will be available to the general public, government officials and other interested groups.
- Participants will have access to a copy of the thesis once it is completed in April 2012.

#### Risks:

- There are no foreseeable harms that participants or others might be subject to during or as a result of the research

#### Participant Agreement

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary. I understand the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview, I may do so without having to give an explanation.

The researcher has reviewed the individual and social benefits and risks of this project with me. I am aware the data will be used in an Honours Thesis Project that will be publicly available in the Geography Department at McGill University. I have the right to review, comment on, and/or withdraw information prior to the Honours Thesis submission. The data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to my personal identity unless I specify otherwise.

If I have any questions about this study, I am free to contact the student researcher (Wren Laing, wren.laing@mail.mcgill.ca, +231 (0) 62046 277, or the faculty adviser (Prof. Nancy Ross, nancy.ross@mcgill.ca). If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the McGill Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

I have been offered a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.

I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C: List of Interviews

### West Point Resident Interviewed:

<b>Jacob Johnson</b> Male, Age 48 Grebo Tribe Resident since 1980 (July 5, 2011)	<b>Kulah Borbor</b> Female, Age 43 Cape Mount County Resident since 1992 (July 29, 2011)	<b>Anita Jebbah</b> Female, Age 38 Kru Ethnicity Resident since 1970 (July 14, 2011)	<b>David K. Chayee</b> Male, Age 47 Sapo Tribe Resident since 1991 (July 12, 2011)	<b>Zebedee</b> Male, Age 30 Grebo Tribe Resident since 2005 (July 29, 2011)
<b>Beatrice</b> Female, Age 64 Resident since 1968 (July 21, 2011)	<b>Comfort</b> Female, Age 28 Kpelle Tribe Resident since 2005 (July 29, 2011)	<b>Beatrice</b> Female, Age 18 Born in West Point (July 21, 2011)	<b>Agnes</b> Female, Age 26 Resident since 1996 (July 5, 2011)	<b>Diana</b> Female, Age 52 Resident since 1975 (August 9, 2011)
<b>Morris</b> Male, Age 31 Kru Ethnicity Resident since 2008 (August 5, 2011)	<b>Sylvester S. Lamah</b> West Point Township Commissioner Male, Age 31 (July 7, 2011)	<b>Alieu Karh</b> Male, Age 42 Fula Tribe Born in West Point (August 10, 2011)	<b>Lygory</b> Male, Age 48 Born in West Point (August 10, 2011)	

### Government Officials Interviewed:

<b>Mary Broh</b> Mayor of Monrovia (August 12, 2011) Monrovia City Hall	<b>Christian Herbert</b> Assistant Minister for Planning (August 10, 2011) Ministry of Public Works	<b>Elijah Conley</b> Zoning Commissioner (August 10, 2011). Ministry of Public Works	<b>Botoe Zinnah</b> Director, Land Use & Planning (August 10, 2011) Ministry of Public Works
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