FOREST FOOD AND SUBSTANABLE AGRICULTURE

[1]CALVIN S. PASSEWE, [2]ZOGBO LUTHER, [3]PETER GBADEE WISH

[1,2,3]Center For Street Children Education (CESCE)
E-mail: cfsce2020@gmail.com

I. CONTEXT

1.1 National Context

Fourteen years of civil war, which ended in 2003, seriously disrupted the Liberian economy. Leading to an overall impoverishment of the country. An estimated 1.7 million Liberian s are living in poverty, and of these, about 1.3 million people (48 percent) are living in extreme poverty. Poverty is higher in rural areas, where about three quarters (73 percent) of the population is poor.Statistics: Liberia Institute of Statistics and Gio-Information Services (LISGIS); FAO; WFP;

Eighty-one (81 percent) of the population is either highly vulnerable or moderately vulnerable to food insecurity, over a third of Liberian children are stunted and almost 20 percent are underweight.

Since the cessation of hostilities in 2003, the country has been at peace. Post conflict free and fair elections in 2005 led to the installation of the current administration in January 2006. Under the leadership of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the government of Liberia has been rebuilding a shattered economy, restoring peace and security, and improving the livelihoods of the estimated 3.5 million inhabitants (2008 Census). An interim poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) was formulated as the start of a consolidated approach in this regard. The strategy was aimed at enhancing national security and consolidating peace, revitalizing economic growth, strengthening governance and rule of law and rebuilding destroyed or damaged infrastructures.

The PRS was followed by a full Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) for the period April 2008-2011, devising a roadmap for rapid, equitable, and inclusive growth and poverty reduction, including progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Both of these processes recognized the significant role and contributions of the agricultural sector to achieving the country's transition from emergency and rehabilitation on to economic growth and development.

In October 2006, the Ministry of Agriculture issued a Statement of Policy intent for the agriculture sector, identifying the strategy of the sector to support national efforts and to lay the foundation for achieving longer term goals of self-sufficiency and competitiveness in food production, expansion of cash crop production, increased employment and incomes, and diversification of the production base.

Predicated upon this, a Comprehensive Assessment of the Agriculture Sector of Liberia (CAAS-Lib) was subsequently carried out by the Government (2006/7) with support from the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), World Bank and the international Fund for Agricultural Development (FAD). The study essentially identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of the sector.

The results of the analysis then informed determination of the nature and scope of actions to be taken to make the sector effective in the country's reconstruction and development program.

A National Validation Workshop of the CAAS-Lib confirmed, as a priority for the sector, the need and urgency to prepare a comprehensive Food and Agricultural Policy and strategy, an Action Plan and an investment program with the direct involvement of all stakeholders. These instruments would be used to mobilize and direct appropriate resources to the rehabilitation and development of the sector.

II. FOOD AND AGRICULTURE SECTOR:

The Importance of Agriculture

The agriculture sector over the years, and increasingly during the recent past, significantly contributed to the Liberian economy. The contribution of agriculture (including fisheries) support to the GDP was around 10 percent in the late 1970's. During the war years, the sector provided the mainstay of the economy and the only meaningful source of livelihood to a large segment of the population including the displaced and conflict affected. In the period immediately following the end of the war, the sector contributed over half of the country's GDP (about fifty-two percent) by 2005), as other economic sectors such as mining, manufacturing and services had declined during the years of conflict.

Agriculture related imported products, of which food and life animals account for over a third amounted to well over half (50%) of the total imports in the post war period, second only to petroleum products.

The agriculture sector is now proving itself valuable to recovery and development efforts, and central to

peace building in Liberia. Resumption of farming activities has enhanced food security and assisted in sustaining resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and conflict affected communities, as well as creating employment for women and youths. As a major source of growth in the country, investment in revitalizing the value chains f agricultural commodities will significantly improve access to food, generate sustainable remunerative employment, and improve livelihood of rural communities, thereby significantly contributing to the consolidation of peace, stability, economic recovery and development.

Structure and Performance of the sector

Liberia's agriculture sector is dominated by traditional subsistence farming systems on uplands that are characterized by labor intensive-shifting cultivation, low technologies and use of rudimentary inputs, resulting in low productivity. The farming systems are primarily forest based and they cover the largest portion of cultivated land area, are concentrated in the central belt of the country, and account for almost half (50%) of the total land area and almost (90%) of arable land.

Liberia's farm family population is heavily concentrated in Nimba County followed by Bong and Lofa counties. Over 90% of these farm families are small scale subsistence farmers primarily engaged in growing rice and cassava, the smallholder sector, which dominates agricultural activities currently experiences poor tenure security.

Small acreages of tree crops are maintained for generating cash income while rice, intercropped with vegetables and other food crops, occupy the major portion of cultivated land (about 87%), which is on upland. Currently, over 95% of Liberia's arms are located on uplands, which are far less productive and contribute to environmental degradation. A secondary toot and tuber-based farming system (involving some cereals) is concentrated in the northern region, and a third farming system occurs in the costal belt with activity complemented with mixed cropping.

Commercial agriculture activities are almost exclusively plantation estates of rubber, and to a lesser extent oil palm. Coffee and cocoa are produced mainly by smallholders and exclusively for export. Value addition is limited and restricted to rubber. Besides the plantation estates, very little commercial investment has been made in the agriculture sector, except for limited commodities' trading which has persisted over the years, and a few recently established poultry and livestock farms.

The livestock sub-sector was decimated as a result of years of years f civil conflicts. Currently, livestock population is below 10% of national requirements. The fisheries sub-sector is also under developed, but has good potential for growth, since only 6.8% of sustainable yield is harvested annually.

Land and water resources are abundant and offer potential for significant expansion of agricultural production. Low land areas comprise approximately 6.1% of total land but many are in small, noncontiguous areas and widely scattered or in narrow valleys, thus limiting the maximization of their highly productive and environmentally preferable potentials. Significant potential for irrigation exists (estimated at about 600,000 hectares), with less than 1% of it presently developed.

Past sector Development Approaches and Lessons learnt The 1950's and 60's

The high world demand and prices for primary agriculture commodities such as rubber, coffee and logs, and the open policy of the Government at the time, encouraged the promotion of industrialization and export. Public resources were invested in one or two parastatals to support the value chains of these commodities particularly processing and marketing in the case of cocoa and coffee.

Private sector investment in the sector was high and foreign dominated: partnerships involving the government and cooperatives were also established.

The activities were ad- hoc, mainly carried out under concessions for land agreed between investors and the government for long periods covering 40-99 years. A number of large commercial enterprise were also established for livestock, poultry, agriculture, sugar and rice.

While the Government of President Williams V. S. Tubman recognized the importance of food production, the strategy of "Operation production"that was employed to enhance yields was not directed at raising the productivity of the subsistence sector which dominated cultivation of the staple food commodities at the time. Rather, large scale mechanized commercial production activities were encouraged. There were no meaningful attempts to integrate the monetized export/industrial economy and the subsistence/food producing economy.

1970's

By the start of the seventies, World market prices and demand for Liberi's main exports of rubber and iron ore had begun to deteriorate. This situation, aggravated by increasing global oil prices, worsened the terms of trade for the country. The food gap started to become clearly visible as imports became more expensive. Occasional scarcity of the staple food, rice, and the accompanying uneasy periods of instability raised awareness of and need for food self-sufficiency and an urgency to reverse the direction of

the approaches to food production. This led the government of President William R. Tolbert to adopt the policy of self-sufficiency in staple food production. Note: during this period, the sector was a robust, monetized economy of exports and industrialization, but with negligible attention to food production and the subsistence economy.

There was a strategy shift from large scale mechanized to the establishment of Agriculture Development Projects (ADPs), mainly directed at rice production from irrigated lands, and development of swamps for small producers. The projects, which were public sector operated, were funde3d by loans from the World Bank, Donor Governments and Development Agencies. The projects employed and empowered farm families by providing them with infrastructure, credit, extension services and other essential inputs to produce irrigated rice in particular, as well as tree crops and other selected industrial crops such as sugar. Owing to the large costs of the projects, poor design and management, they could not be sustained and had to be terminated once external funding ceased. The ADPs however, contributed to the development of the sector by strengthening the Planning Department of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Central Agriculture Research Institute (CARI), and preparing a policy statement for the sector. "The Blue Book" that gave a ore holistic direction to sector activities with an accent on development while pursuing growth. Regrettably, the policy was never approved and implemented.

1980s

The 1979 "rice riot" that heralded the start of the eighties and the magnitude of food insecurity in the country dictated, to a large extent, a change in policy direction from export led-growth to food self-sufficiency, and the diversification of agriculture and food production. Emphasis was placed on improving and modernizing the subsistence sector, with more development assistance provided by development agencies. The government of President Samuel K. Doe sought to increase public sector resource allocation to the sector. A Green Revolution Action Plan prepared by the government, which elaborated the nature and scope of the new policy changes, especially longer-term planning, was awaiting validation when the civil war broke out at the end of 1989.

1990-2000

Armed civil conflict pervaded Liberia from 1989-1997 and later through 2008. During this period, it was difficult to establish meaningful longer term policy perspectives for the economy as a whole. Activities in the sector were characterized by emergency activities for food production and income, and limited attempts at rehabilitation. The regime of Charles Taylor established a two-phase approach to rehabilitation of the sector. The first was contained in a two-year National Reconstruction Program (1998-2000), with emphasis placed on emergency production ad revitalization of food production. The second phase was directed at development and growth of the sector over the medium to long term. This was contained in a five-year National Reconstruction and Development plan, 2002-2006. Emphasis for the sector was placed on diversification, value-addition agro-industries, strengthening of food security through self-reliance, intensification of extension services, data management, strengthening of parastatals, credit, Marketing and Cooperatives, restoration of the value chains of cash crops, participatory forest management and productivity enhancement in artisanal fisheries.

III. FORESTRY

The forest area covers 4.3 million hectares (ha) or 45% of the total land area (9.58 million ha) and accounts for the largest remnant of the Upper Guinea forest of West Africa. The contribution of forest to GDP, which was only 5 to 6 % before the 1990s, soared to cover 20% in the early 2000s. it declined with the UN ban on timber exports. Liberia's recently established National Forest Policy lays out guidelines and principles in three pillars: Commercial, Community and Conservation forestry (referred to as the 3 Cs). Sustainable commercial forestry generates employment, foreign exchange and government revenue; while community forestry focuses more on the economic, social and cultural values of forests to people who live in and on the fringes of forest areas; forest conservation, biodiversity conservation, maintenance of other environmental functions of forests (e.g, soil and water protection) and protection of specific forest areas (e.g. parks and wild life sanctuaries) ensures sustainability of Liberia's forestry resources.

The Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy will complement and reinforce the new National Forestry Policy as in a synergistic manner towards the effective management and sustainability of Liberia's forest resources.

The Liberian government has established by law the "Environmental Protection Agency" responsible to regulate the environmental issues that may affect land utilization and water management and pollution. This agency is working in line with other line ministries to ensure that conservation and preservation is paramount. Forest laws have also been formulated to protect species in strategic regions of Liberia to avoid lost of species in wood and animals/birds. Parks are also situated in the Eastern region of Liberia and some parts of Marshall for scientific testing (Bio-chemistry). Vaccines and disease control mechanisms.

The Ministry of Agriculture in partnership with donor agencies have built Hubs around the protected areas managed by extension personnels to safe guard the forest and its species by providing and improving controlled cultivation areas with no harm to the bio-diversities.

IV. AGRICULTURE MECHANIZATION

The main power source for agricultural operations in nearly all the production areas in Liberia is labor intensive using simple hand tools. But agricultural operations from land preparation to post harvest or value addition can be supported by mechanization, with resulting benefits of reduction in drudgery and increase in labor productivity. Simple equipment such as power tillers, corn harvesters, mechanized cassava graters, mechanized cereal and coffee hullers, and oil palm mills have been proven to have a significant impact on production, productivity and competitiveness.

Smallholder farmers and many farm based Cooperatives cannot afford the huge sums of capital cost for the purchase of farm machines, except through projects, which is in most cases difficult or even impossible to obtain finance for. The government is currently promoting farmers-based organizations through farming equipment to boost production and productivity, which will take the next five years to reaching an optimal goal of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Processing finished produce for marketing is a fundamental challenge even if value addition is considered.

Institutional context: (CSCE)
Center for Street Children is a non-governmental organization founded to help disadvantaged children in Liberia. Currently, we are supporting over 200 children in Montserado and Cape Mount Counties. Our support has been addressing the physical needs of these children in areas of education (tuition) and educational materials (copy books, book bags, pencils, etc.).

In 2022, the Institution decided to engage into agriculture activities, especially growing food that will be used to provide feeding for students enrolled into our program from very poor family background.Currently, the Institution operates in Montserrado county, Monrovia; and Wealor town, Tewor District, Grand Cape Mount County.

As an organization, we believe that many food Aid programs have been organized in Liberia to feed citizens, but not in a sustainable way. “Handouts”, which started with wives of Presidents and Ministers giving food aids to destitute families could not be sustained until the American government, through its food support to the country was introduced. Food package program referred to as “CARE FOOD” was distributed to schools and medical institutions as a means of encouraging high turnouts to enhance students’ education and for women and children to attend hospitals.

In the 90s, especially as a result of the war, there was massive reduction and scarcity of food, which led to the World food Program (WFP) to providing food and non-food commodities to internally displaced people and refugees. All over the world, especially in third world countries, this has been and still is a factor affecting the lives of poor people. If our countries don’t adopt a new relevant approach to feeding its citizens in a sustainable way, it will make us to continually be reliant on external support, thus making us vulnerable to a large extent.

Center for Street Children Approach
Realizing that education has declined in Liberia in the last two decades, the institution is determined to support disadvantaged children in its work through agriculture by expanding its food crop and vegetable production using mechanized system. By this method, the institution will feed its students and at the same time generate income to incorporate new programs such as training for teachers, girls’ enhancement and empowerment, construction of dormitories for children living more than 25 miles radius from a school environment, to name a few.

We grow roots and tuber crops, and to large extent vegetables to maintain balanced diet for children that cannot afford a meal a day, including those that a mal-nourished and stunted.

Expansion and sustainable strategy;
Currently the institution has acquired over 20 acres of farm land to cultivate several food crops through mechanized approach. We have engaged Local National Governmental Organizations to help with tractors for plowing, planting and harvesting. The issue is that we pay service charge, something we will not afford looking at our financial status at the moment. If we must sustain this goal of sustainability, then we must obtain a full financial package that will enable us possess our own production equipment to support early childhood and adolescent education in Liberia, which will reduce food aid gradually util it is no more an issue in schools or farm families.

The Advantage of Agriculture
Our conclusive statement is that Sustainable Agriculture as an activity of any country can only be achieved if that country is self-sufficient and self-reliant. This means that it does not depend perpetually on food and other imports. To a greater extent, it generates more income that boost a country’s GDP. Internal industrialization also reduces huge dependency and therefore stabilizes growth of

the economy and mitigates inflation. In terms of the forest, environmentally friendly systems are therefore adopted to ensure the forest land is preserved and conserved for generations unborn. Animal, bird and fish species are protected and land degradation is largely reduced.

As an institution, these are critical concerns for our generation and we must take advantage of protecting our heritage in a sustainable way based on our direct involvement in policy adherence and management of our resources.

★★★