

09 A Decade Later

Time for a new approach to Community Forestry in Liberia

1. INTRODUCTION

After more than a decade of piloting the implementation of formalized community forestry in Liberia, a critical lesson has been learned: a significant segment of the population in forest communities prefer forest management regimes that deliver tangible development benefits, such as much needed infrastructure. Roads, bridges, schools and health facilities tend to top the list of desired projects in most areas.

Diverse stakeholders including civil society, government i.e. the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), international development agencies, private sector and donors have played different roles in these community forestry pilots. Some efforts have focused on conservation complemented with livelihood interventions, such as in the case of the Numopoh Community Forest and Nitrian Community Forest in Sinoe County. Others have focused on monitoring and reporting questionable and sometimes illegal practices during the application process, and using the findings for advocacy, and others have focused on supporting communities to fulfill the legal requirements to be granted a Community Forestry Management Agreement (CFMA). Logging companies on the other hand have focused on promoting the traditional industrial logging model in CFMAs, which involves primarily extracting high-value round logs, hauling them to a sea port, and loading them onto waiting ships for export.

A second critical lesson that has been learned is that none of these pilots have delivered the development benefits that communities desperately need.

The largest percentage of donor investment in community forestry, to date, has been channeled along two pathways: one through the FDA and the other through international, corporate development agencies. None of these channels to date has adopted a holistic, integrated approach that delivers both development benefits and conservation outcomes.

A third lesson that has been learnt is that to advance community forestry as a viable model of forest management in Liberia, it must be built on three pillars: delivering development benefits, sustaining the resource base, and partnerships that genuinely strive to deliver on the first two pillars for communities.

This Policy Brief argues for an approach that situates forest and forest resources at the center of sustainable development efforts in forest communities. It proposes, for example that community forestry should be oriented towards social empowerment and community-owned enterprise development, and move away from the rent-seeking approach in which communities look to logging companies because they promise jobs, roads, schools, clinics, and clean water.

All stakeholders have a role to play in developing this new approach. For example, Liberian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) could be engaged in a more empowering way with international development agencies, i.e. Implementing Partners, and donors, and for the long-term. Also, rather than relying on the traditional model of grant making that is based on twelve to twenty-four months project cycles, the brief argues that donors could adopt a more long-term approach with the view to develop national capacity and at the same time deliver tangible economic benefits for forest dependent communities. Liberian NGOs could take on a central role in this effort, working alongside the FDA, sharing experiences and learning together on how best to support communities. Responsible private sector investment and technical assistance could be leveraged to scale-up after successful piloting.

2. BACKGROUND

Thirteen years ago, in December 2005, the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) under the auspices of the Liberia Forest Initiative organized the First International Conference on Community Forestry in Liberia. The workshop brought together about 100 international and national experts on community forestry, government officials, community representatives,

national and international NGOs and donors to develop a shared vision of community forestry for Liberia and develop an action plan to support successful implementation of the approach. Specifically, the workshop aimed to develop a shared understanding on what community forestry should mean in Liberia, the enabling conditions that would need to be created and how to create them, and how to support the evolution of community forest that would be locally appropriate and viable.

The Monrovia Declaration, issued at the end of the workshop called on all actors to:

“Promote the development of community forestry based on the aspirations and needs of communities and the potential of their forests and lands as a means to establishing just, equitable and sustainable forms of land and resource use rights and management”.¹

During the conference, delegates recognized community forestry as one of the three pillars of the national forest management regime, noted that it held potential as a vehicle for local communities to achieve sustainable economic development, but acknowledged that it was being held back by various challenges. The

delegates concluded that achieving viable community forestry in Liberia “may require government to change the manner of its administration of forest resources”.²

Donors have made good on their pledge to support community forestry, but so far the economic and sustainable development impacts have been minimal.

3. DONOR INVESTMENT TO DATE

Since the conference on community forestry in 2005, various donors have made significant investments in community forestry in Liberia. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has allocated US\$39 million to different projects since 2008; the last one is expected to conclude in 2020. The Government of Norway, through the Liberia Forest Sector Project (LFSP) is also investing US\$10.5 million in community forestry. Other donors have invested as well but their investments have involved minuscule amounts compared to the United States and Norway.

USAID & NORWAY INVESTMENT IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY SINCE 2008

Program Title	Duration	Budget US\$
Land Rights & Community Forest Program (LRCFP)	2008 - 2010	8,000,000 ³
People, Rules and Organizations Supporting the Protection of Ecosystem Resources (PROSPER)	2012 - 2017	9,000,000 ⁴
Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability (FIFES)	2015 - 2020	22,000,000 ⁵
Liberia Forest Sector Project (LFSP)	2016 - 2020	10,500,000 ⁶
Total budget allocation since 2008		US\$49,500,000

The table above disaggregates the investments the US Government and Norway have made in community forestry since 2008. While these numbers do not tell the full story, it provides an indication of how much is being invested in the sector.

Themes that are common to all of these programs are community enterprise development for sustainable livelihoods and income generation, and improving forest governance within the target communities.

To better illustrate how the financial commitment from donors is not yet translating to real impacts on the ground, we take a closer look at the Forest Incomes For

Environmental Sustainability (FIFES) program. We examine the FIFES program for three reasons: (1) it was launched in 2015 ostensibly to build on the USAID-funded Land Rights and Community Forestry Program (LRCFP) and the People, Rules and Organizations Supporting the Protection of Ecosystem Resources (PROSPER) Program; (2) the program is the most emphatic and explicit about its plans to focus on community enterprise development and sustainable livelihoods as well as improving forest governance; and (3) after two major interventions funded by the same donor, the implementing agency, ACDI/VOCA had an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the other two programs before it.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Center for International Forestry Research (2005), Towards a shared vision and action frame for community forestry in Liberia: Proceedings of the First International Workshop on Community Forestry in Liberia, Monrovia, 12-15 December 2005, p.3. Available at: www.worldagroforestry.org/downloads/publications/PDFs/PR13950.PDF.

² Ibid.

³ Land Rights and Community Forestry Program, 2008 - 2010 (web summary). Available at: <https://land-links.org/project/land-rights-and-community-forest-program-liberia/>.

⁴ People Rules and Organizations Supporting the Protection of Ecosystem Resources, 2012 - 2017, (web summary). Available at: www.land-links.org/project/people-rules-and-organizations-supporting-the-protection-of-ecosystem-resources-liberia/

⁵ Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability, 2015 - 2020 (Program Summary). Available at: www.acdivoca.org/projects/forest-incomes-for-environmental-sustainability-fifes/.

⁶ World Bank, 2016, Project appraisal document on a proposed grant in the amount of US\$37.5 million from the Liberia Forest Landscape Single Donor Trust Fund to the Republic of Liberia for a Liberia Forest Sector Project, p.54. Available at: www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/kld/kos/liberia/worldbank-agreement.pdf.

FOREST INCOMES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY (FIFES) PROGRAM

Funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the FIFES program was launched in 2015, with ACDI/VOCA as the Implementing Partner. The program came after the completion of two similar USAID funded programs, i.e. LRCFP and PROSPER. Another US-based development agency Tetra Tech was the Implementing Partner in these two projects.



FIFES project sign boards Yriah Town Nimba County @ SDI

The objectives of the program are:⁷

(1) To create well-developed rural, forest-based enterprises, which provide economic opportunities for farmers and forest-dependent communities while combatting deforestation and biodiversity loss; and

(2) To enhance the capacity of government of Liberia (GoL) institutions and rural communities to sustainably manage and benefit from CF [Community Forest] and buffer zone natural resources.

The objectives are reflected in the following three activity components of the program: "(1) sustainable forest-based enterprises developed and strengthened; (2) CF management improved, and (3) cross-cutting themes of gender, youth and public outreach".⁸

The FIFES program was targeted towards three outcomes:⁹

(1) Monitor beneficiaries to assess their awareness and understanding of forest biodiversity as well as monitor the capacity of local partners and organizations to provide support for forest-dependent communities;

(2) Work with 11 community forest to improve the surrounding local communities' ability to manage the forests in a sustainable and economically beneficial manner through increasing the productivity of existing value

chains and promoting good governance of the management bodies for each forest; and

(3) Within 5 – 10 years, only community based entrepreneurs, working with the Community Forest, and using local labor, sustainably harvest and mill (either directly, or through agreements) timber harvested from community forests and other community lands on a pre-order basis for buyers in urban centers. No outside actors harvest community timber, and no community members harvest trees without Community Forest approval.

USAID commissioned the Liberia Strategic Analysis to conduct a mid-term performance evaluation of the program in 2018. The evaluation report was quite critical about the performance of the program on key objectives and planned outcomes. For example, the report noted:

FIFES has not assisted forest product-based enterprises. The FIFES FY2016 Annual Report says that FIFES had laid the "foundation for exploring opportunities in sustainable timber extraction", identified "...promising opportunities in timber-based value chains," and "scheduled the field visits of ACDI/VOCA's wood-based expert to identify promising opportunities in timber-based value chains".¹⁰

The report goes further:

Although the Annual Report says that ACDI/VOCA "selected priority farm/ forest value chains,"¹¹ those value chains, in fact were all for non-forest products. The FIFES Draft FY 2017 Annual Report says that FIFES will help to start new timber and non-timber forest product (NTFP) EGs [Enterprise Groups]. None of the KIIIs [Key Informant Interviews] or FGDs [Focus Group Discussions], however referred to plans to start new timber or NTFP EGs.¹²

The report is also critical on several other indicators, including eroding local livelihoods by restricting access to forest resources that communities depend on.

ANALYSIS

The FIFES example highlighted in above is not unique; it is a common phenomenon in the international development aid community. There are countless accounts of promises being made at the onset of large international donor-driven development that are seldom fulfilled. However, in this instance, there is so much at stake.

⁷ Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability, November 2015 – November 2020. Implementer: ACDI/VOCA (Program Update). Available from: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1860/Economic_Growth-FIFES_pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability (2015 – 2020) Fact Sheet, May 2017. Available from: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1860/FIFES_Fact_Sheet_May_2017.pdf.

¹⁰ Evaluation: Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability, Social Impact Inc. 2018, p.8. Available from: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA0015TC.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Firstly, Liberia's forest could be significantly degraded as more and more communities turn to logging companies that are only interested in extracting high value timber as rapidly as they can and then leave. The common trend is that these logging companies take out high value timber as round logs and pay a pittance in royalties to the forest-owning communities.

Secondly, it undermines advocacy for sustainable management and conservation of Liberia's forests, as more and more communities lose faith in the promises of sustainable and/or alternative livelihoods. Interestingly, communities are becoming more adept at playing along when these projects come into their areas, but fall back on their old ways as soon as the project ends – with very little tangible benefit being left behind.

Thirdly, it reinforces the notion that setting up and managing a viable community-owned forest-based enterprise is so challenging and costly that the forest-economy is best served by logging companies that have the financial resources, technical expertise and management capacity. For example, one could argue that if the US\$ 22 million allocated to FIFES could not lead to the creation of at least one viable community-owned forest enterprise, it cannot be done.

However, as the number of approved CFMAs grows so is the number of CFMAs being handed over to logging companies that are interested in the cut-and-run approach to forest operations. And, as these companies rapidly deplete the timber stock and open once closed areas to uncontrolled or unplanned human settlement creation, so will the degradation of Liberia's forest intensify. Hence, to do nothing is not an option.

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of the literature and the current situation with community forestry, several conclusions may be drawn.

Firstly, donors investing in these programs clearly have the right intentions and allocate significant resources to programs with the potential to deliver significant positive impacts. Sadly, these programs have delivered neither the desired environmental, social nor economic



The Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) works to transform decision-making processes in relation to natural resources and to promote equity in the sharing of benefits derived from natural resource management in Liberia. The organization's vision is a Liberia in which natural resource management is guided by the principles of sustainability and good governance and benefits all Liberians. Its activities cover a range of crosscutting issues including governance and management, the environment, state and corporate social responsibility, economic and social justice for rural populations, and the democratic participation of ordinary people in government management of natural resources. The organization received the Goldman Environmental Prize (the world's largest prize honouring grassroots environmentalists for outstanding environmental achievements) in 2006

benefits those beneficiary communities so desperately need. Instead of delivering on their objectives, the programs they support have delivered more CFMAs, but weak community governance institutions that are handing over communities' forests to logging companies for very minimal portion of the revenue. This seems to be at odds with the do-no-harm policies they espouse in their aid policies.

Secondly, the takeover of community forests by logging companies that benefit or are benefiting from these investments may potentially pose major threats to Liberia's forest estate in the short to medium term. Of grave concern is the possibility that the logging companies threatening to decimate Liberia's forest are the ones that are actually benefiting from CFMAs. In addition, the Liberia Forest Sector Project, funded by the Government of Norway, is currently supporting community forest application processes and limited capacity building. The FDA should be more concerned about the direction of community forestry in regards to communities' capacity to undertake enterprise development and sustainable livelihoods initiatives.

Finally, rather than giving in or continuing along the business-as-usual trajectory, donors need to step up and actively explore other avenues for supporting community forestry, with a strong focus on community-owned forest-based enterprise development.

The time to look for a new approach is now. Rather than shift focus to other sectors and turn their backs on what remains the most promising model for sustainable forest management in Liberia, donors should engage more and think together with Liberian NGOs, government partners and, responsible or well-meaning private sector actors on how to best overcome the challenges facing community forestry in Liberia.



NUCFMB President Say Thompson at Awareness on CUC Template in Tubmanburg @ SDI