

'Our future is now'

A call for urgent action in support of Liberian farmers producing food for Liberia



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The Liberian context

Liberia is a highly food insecure country, with a “serious” state of hunger rating according to the 2012 Global Hunger Index. According to Liberia’s agriculture policy “81% of the population is either highly vulnerable or moderately vulnerable to food insecurityⁱⁱⁱ”. To address this situation, two of the three broad objectives of the policy are (1) to make *safe and nutritious foods available in sufficient quantity and quality at all times to satisfy the nutrition needs of all Liberianⁱⁱⁱ*” and (2) to ensure “*inclusive and pro-poor growth in agricultural production, productivity, competitiveness, value addition and diversification, and linkages to marketⁱⁱⁱ*”.

According to the UN, Liberia imports 60% of its food^{iv} of these food imports rice constitutes 65%.^v

Given these figures it would appear misguided that agricultural production for export is being developed rather than developing agricultural production for food for domestic consumption.

It is time that Liberian farmers especially those that grow food, are supported to grow more food and have better access to market – to feed our growing population. 70% of the world is fed by smallholder farmers.^{vi} Investment in small-scale food production is key to addressing food insecurity and providing sustainable livelihoods.

Agriculture is not only about seeds and tools it is also about politics and economics. Farmers should bear this in mind when discussing the Maputo Declaration. Access to land and security of tenure are two of the key pillars of development in any agrarian societies, such as Liberia. Farmers need to engage and secure their seat at the table where decisions about our collective future are being made. When you have secured your seats at the table, you can then speak to power and challenge policies that are detrimental to your needs. This conference provides such a space. I urge you to take advantage of the momentum that is being generated to hold duty bearers to account. Maputo+20 should not echo the same messages we have been hearing this week.

The African context

Land deals have become the new scramble for Africa. The World Bank has estimated that of the 56 million hectares of farmland sought globally in 2009 alone, more than 70% of the demand was for land in Africa.^{vii} Liberia, for example, has a land area of approximately 10 million hectares^{viii} but private corporations now control over 5 million hectares, for mining, logging and agribusinesses.^{ix} These leases known as concession agreements facilitate large-scale land acquisitions by

companies, especially those engaged in the production of rubber, palm oil, timber and mineral resources mainly for export markets.

This is important to bear in mind because **Africa's over reliance on export of raw materials for American, European and Asian industries since independence, has contributed to underdevelopment on the continent.** Our abundant natural resource wealth has not translated into tangible development benefits for all because: (1) we undervalue our resources and sell at give away prices; (2) most African governments manage the meagre revenue they generate so poorly that citizens are constantly asking "where is the money?" from our natural resources; and (3)

"Africa's resource wealth has been plundered and squandered. It has served the interests of the few, not the many. Revenues that could have been used to improve lives have instead been used to build personal fortunes, finance civil wars, and support corrupt and unaccountable political elites. **Africa loses twice as much in illicit financial outflows as it receives in international aid"**. Africa Progress Panel, 2013

Our governments have let us down, and the multinational corporations on the continent have not been good corporate citizens. It is time for that to change.

Some suggestions for the government and stakeholders

A five year roadmap for agricultural development should be developed by the MoA with relevant stakeholders including FUN, donors and civil society. This roadmap should include yearly monitoring and evaluation by all stakeholders. This road map should take the suggestions below into account:

1. Investments in low-cost farming technologies and make that available to farmers across the country. This will increase food production and reduce our reliance on imported rice.
2. Low cost and appropriate seeds must be made available to Liberian farmers.
3. Prioritising rural roads that support farmers' access to market.
4. Addressing barriers farmers face in accessing credit.
5. Policies that sufficiently protect the domestic market and create favourable market conditions for domestic agricultural producers.
6. Initiatives which will specifically address the needs of women farmers.
7. Remove the retroactivity clause from the new Land Rights policy to ensure all Liberians have equal rights to their customary land including those who's land is currently covered by a concession.

At the regional level, ECOWAS and governments across West Africa should:

1. Prioritise policies which support economic development through regional trade rather than the

current over-reliance on Foreign Direct Investment.

2. Address land tenure issues challenging agriculture development by the implementation of policies adhering to the FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure.

Civil society actors working on human rights, economic justice, rule of law, democracy, anti-corruption, health and nutrition across West Africa should support our farmers in their struggle to feed our growing population in the region.

FUN members have a better way of saying what I have said here today: “No farmers, No food”; remember – hungry people don't make good neighbours.

Thank you.

ⁱ Government of Liberia, Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy: from subsistence to sufficiency, undated, p.1

ⁱⁱ Government of Liberia, Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy: from subsistence to sufficiency, undated, p.xii

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*

^{iv} Liberia Full Country Visit Report. Coordination Team of the UN System High-Level Task Force for the Global Food Security Crisis; 2009 May. Available from: http://un-foodsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Liberia_Sept09.pdf

^v Balachandran et al (2012), p.4

^{vi} ETC Group (2009) Who Will Feed Us? Questions for the Food and Climate Crisis.

^{vii} The World Bank (2011) Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can it Yield Equitable and Sustainable Benefits?

^{viii} National Investment Brief, High-Level Conference on Water for Agriculture and Energy in Africa: the Challenges of Climate Change Sirte, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, 15-17 December 2008. [Accessed 08.10.2012 at <http://www.sirtewaterandenergy.org/docs/reports/Liberia-Draft2.pdf>]

^{ix} Rights and Resources Group (2013), Investments into the Agribusiness, Extractive and Infrastructure Sectors of Liberia: An Overview, Washington DC: RRG, p.18.