

Reducing food insecurity:

The Liberian Red Cross Society's experience

Background

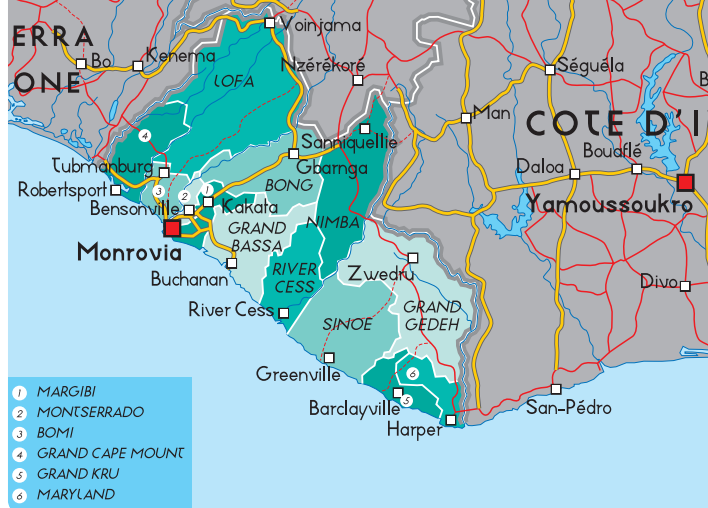
Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world. More than 90 per cent of its population survives on less than US\$ 2 per day. Fourteen years of internal conflict, including eight years of civil war, ended in 2003, when a peace agreement was signed in Accra, Ghana. The long-running conflict, however, led to the collapse of the economy and unemployment rates are now estimated to be as high as 85 per cent. With less than 10 per cent of arable land under cultivation, Liberia remains one of the most food-insecure countries in the world. The poor live mainly in rural areas, lack basic services and adequate shelter, and survive by subsistence farming. The majority of farmers are women who have had few opportunities to develop more advanced farming mechanisms. Without help, they will remain below the poverty line.¹ Almost half the population is undernourished² and 39 per cent of the children suffer from moderate to severe stunting.³ Poverty along with poor food preparation, lack of safe drinking water and consumption of an unbalanced diet are key elements contributing to the continuous deterioration of health conditions, which affects household food security.

The project

Towards the end of 2002, the Liberian Red Cross Society began to provide basic farming implements including tools, seeds, insecticides and fertilizers to communities in three of Liberia's 15 counties: Grand Bassa, Margibi and Rivercess. These counties were selected based on the level of vulnerability, determined from the conclusions of needs assessments carried out before the project began. However, the lack of even the most basic farming necessities, such as tools and seeds, in many of Liberia's communities called for an expansion of the programme.

To take part in the project, family heads had to meet the following criteria:

- They had to be farmers and interested in cultivating crops every farming season.
- They should be willing to cultivate not less than two acres (0.8 hectares) of farmland.
- They had to be resident in one of the communities/towns/villages in the project.
- They had to have land available for farming.



A local advisory committee, which serves as a bridge between the National Society and the farmers, selected the beneficiaries. The committee comprises representatives of a cross-section of residents, including local authorities, elders, women, young people and Red Cross members. People from each community designate committee members at the beginning of each farming season in a meeting organized by the local authorities.

So far the programme has extended to more than 200 communities in nine counties. It is now operational in Grand Bassa, Bomi, Bong, Cape Mount, Grand Gedeh, Margibi, Montserrado, Rivercess and Sinoe counties.

The goal of the project is in line with the main directions of the International Federation's food security strategy for West and Central Africa. The strategy aims at creating a network of people in communities to animate food security activities locally, developing a communications system among communities, mapping risk areas and establishing training, partnerships and peer assistance among regional National Societies. It also plans to set up small credit units and to distribute seeds and tools in targeted areas.

Outcomes

Since 2002, the Liberian Red Cross Society has succeeded in providing basic agricultural implements to approximately 65,000 beneficiaries in some 6,500 farm units. About 720 acres (342 hectares) of land have been cultivated and at present another 266 acres (127 hectares) are under cultivation. Farming equipment provided includes 15,000 tools (cutlasses, big and small hoes, rakes, shovels, axes, pangas or machetes, etc.), 75,000 kilograms of seed (rice, beans, peanuts and vegetables) and 6,000 bundles of cassava cuttings.

Two training courses in basic crop management practices were also conducted for 45 Red Cross volunteers and two meetings

1. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Humanitarian appeal 2006: Liberia. Available at: http://www.fao.org/reliefoperations/liberia_en.asp

2. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Human development report 2005. New York: UNDP, 2005. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2005/>

3. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The state of the world's children 2006. New York: UNICEF, 2005. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_30398.html

were held on awareness and sensitization for 60 community members, including town chiefs, women and youth leaders. These meetings were held at the beginning of each farming season.

Lessons learned

The programme has made a remarkable contribution to community development initiatives. From focus group discussions, it is apparent that the living conditions and nutrition of the direct beneficiaries have improved. The tools provided have also been used for purposes other than agriculture, such as in construction and rebuilding work (such as constructing gutters) and in rehabilitating local roads in order to improve access to markets.

However, the project did bring to light a number of weak points:

- The **state of roads** poses a very serious problem to the project. Roads are in very poor condition and are, at times, impossible to pass. This makes it difficult to deliver equipment on time. Many roads have log bridges, which have not been repaired for more than five years and the means to fix them properly is lacking. The United Nations has been repairing roads and bridges to some of the major towns, but the state of roads from the towns to villages and rural areas remains poor.
- From the onset of the project, **insecurity** has been an issue. The population has not been stable in the rural areas where the projects were implemented. Before the peace agreement was signed in 2003, the rural population was repeatedly harassed and intimidated by armed militia. So, for reasons of security, people were constantly moving from rural to urban areas. This meant that, in 2002 and 2003, many farmers abandoned their land and lost all they had, including the tools provided by the project.
- The **'dependency syndrome'**. After having been assisted for a long period of time, many communities had become dependent on receiving aid. To overcome this, the Red Cross tried to target beneficiaries who had not previously been recipients of aid. Most people initially wanted to work alone to meet their families' immediate food needs. Gradually, however, they started to work together as a community and the concept of "today I help you, tomorrow you help me" slowly took root.
- **Infestations of insects and other pests** are a big problem in farming in tropical Africa. The project continues to experience insect and pest infestations, particularly during the rainy season when heavy downpours make crop spraying ineffective. The Red Cross has encouraged close monitoring of crops and rapid initial treatment with organic means.
- **Unstable market price.** The prices of seeds, whether imported or local, fluctuate over time. At the beginning of the planting season, seed prices are often much higher than costs budgeted for in the programme planning. For example, the price of one

kilogram of peanut seeds increases by 150 per cent when the planting season begins and the seeds have to be purchased.

- **Lack of warehousing** limits the possibility of purchasing seeds when they are cheapest.
- About 50 per cent of **agricultural seeds** come from outside of the country. Many of these are not viable, are not adapted to local climatic conditions or produce very little. But locally produced seeds are not reliable either. Many seeds purchased from local suppliers have a germination-success rate of less than 70 per cent.
- Short-term solutions to bad seed performance include a **seed-exchange system** where good seeds can be shared among farmers.
- **Strong cultural beliefs and traditional practices** in many parts of the country sometimes bring farming to a halt between harvest-time and the beginning of the farming season.
- The initial **lack of motivation** amongst Red Cross volunteers improved after incentives (such as social and educational benefits, not financial incentives) were provided.

The way forward

The Red Cross has started to provide basic equipment and is still committed to continue the project, if funding is ensured and delivered on time.

While the project's beneficiaries have been satisfied with the tools, some have had problems with the seeds they received. To deal with the problem of inappropriate or poor seeds, it was decided that the National Society should become involved in a seed multiplication project. A pilot project will be set up with, in the first, two-year stage, four communities in two counties focusing on the production and multiplication of rice and vegetable seeds. Volunteers with requisite expertise in rice and vegetable production will manage the project. This programme aims at reducing food insecurity through giving the farmers viable seeds that are less susceptible to pathogens and diseases.

The farmers themselves came up with other suggestions to reduce food insecurity. They include:

- Improving roads from farms to markets so that it is easier for farmers to get their produce to market.
- Building capacity at both household and community levels to preserve and prepare food.
- Constructing storage facilities so that perishable agricultural products can be kept longer.
- Strengthening quarantine programmes at the various ports of entry in order to improve seed quality and viability.

The project has shown that the means to reduce food insecurity do exist, but that they will take many years to be implemented and will require a lot of resources.

For more information, please contact:

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