






LIBERIA DIALOGUES

DIALOGUES' OVERVIEW	<i>The Government of Liberia, through the United Nations Food Systems Summit's National Dialogue Convener and Agriculture Minister Jeanine M. Cooper, has been holding a series of virtual national dialogues for viable and sustained national food systems. The overarching goal of the UN Food Systems Summit, to be convened by the United Nations Secretary- General in September 2021, is to help stakeholders to better understand and manage the complex choices that affect the future of food systems and to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).</i>
OBJECTIVES	<i>The dialogues are aimed at capturing broader views on four main topics relevant to the country's food systems. Stakeholders from all of Liberia's food systems – rice, cassava, cocoa, oil palm, fishery and animal products – are participating in the dialogues to highlight challenges and constraints in all aspects of our food systems from seeds to wastes and provide remedies in improving those impediments. Liberia's common position – on a viable and sustainable food systems drawn from the dialogues – will be submitted at the summit in New York.</i>
NATIONAL CONVENER	<i>Hon. Jeanine M. Cooper – Minister of Agriculture</i>
REPORT PREPARED BY	<i>Mr. Ansu Sekou Konneh – Head/National Coordination Secretariat</i>
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REPORT'S AIMS	<i>To enlighten the public and food systems stakeholders on significant highlights from the dialogues in order to have their inputs if they have not been following the dialogues.</i>

Participants		Number of Panelists		Valuable Inputs	
	299		31		189
Thematic Areas Discussed		Deliberated Subthemes		Next Theme	Subthemes
	4		7	0	1

Sectors Covered in the Dialogues									
Rice	Cassava	Oil Palm	Cocoa	Food Processing	Youth's Involvement	Women's Active Role	Climate Change	Food Reserves	Nutrition

INTRODUCTION

Liberia is located in West Africa south of the Sahara and heavily depend on agriculture where an estimated 60% of the country's 4.5 million population relies on as primary livelihood and agriculture constitutes 36% of the country's real gross domestic products.

Households in Liberia are mainly engaged in rice, cassava, oil palm and cocoa productions. Rice is the country's main staple followed by cassava.

With several rural households involved in rice, cassava, oil palm and cocoa are important crops to Liberia's food systems and important sources for livelihood and nutrition.

However, overall agricultural productivity is low. Because of this, Liberia imports more than 80 percent of its rice, making the country vulnerable to global food price volatility.

Because of those volatilities, the country experiences limited integrated food systems and the agriculture sector lacks basic infrastructure such as machines, farming equipment/tools, farm-to-market roads, fertilizers and pesticides, and food storage capacity among others.

The food systems national dialogues – held from August 18 to September 3 – provided lots of opportunities; identified several lots constraints and charted pathways to ensuring a viable food system in a country endowed with arable lands, good rainfall and encouraging climatic conditions.

Liberia's dialogues' participants were drawn from farmers, producers' associations, INGOS, civil society organizations, private sector actors, youth groups, women organizations and Government agencies.

The dialogues had 299 participants and 31 expert panelists who discussed seven subthemes under four main themes. The four main topics are:

1. ***Food Value Chain Development: Challenges and Opportunities for Liberia's Economic Growth;***
2. ***Ending Youth Unemployment Through Agriculture: A Case for Liberia;***
3. ***Mitigating Climate Impacts on Liberian Farmers; and***
4. ***Sourcing Home Grown Food to Boost Nutrition in Liberia***

DIALOGUES THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND OUTCOMES

Theme Food Value Chain Development: Challenges and Opportunities for Liberia's Economic Growth		
UN FSS Action Track #	3	Boost nature-positive production

Opportunities: Most of Liberia's food producers are smallholders' farmers, but due to post harvest losses as a result of inadequate storage facilities, there is a surge of agribusinesses since 2017 that are processing Liberia's main food crops -rice, cassava, vegetables, oil palm and cocoa into different derivatives. Local food processors are mainly linked to smallholder farmers who supply them crops. Both smallholder farmers and processors are desirous of expanding productions but face many challenges.

Liberia stands and enjoys distinct competitive advantages in palm oil and situated closed to the European Union and West African markets and growing oil palm in many parts of the world are constrained due to limited access to land.

The country has potentials in developing its livestock sector as Liberia heavily depends on poultry, small rodents and piggery products from neighboring West African countries and other parts of the world.

Owing to Liberia's soil quality, the country has potentials to do organic farming to produce high quality cocoa beans. Local livestock production is still undermined and there are enormous opportunities to expand this sector.

Subtheme **1. Liberia's cassava, cocoa, oil palm, piggery, poultry and rice sectors. What are the opportunities and challenges for production expansion to enhance economic growth and ensuring a viable food system?**

Rice

Farmers outlined a number of challenges and solutions to expand production. Those constraints are: Difficulties in securing financial loans – because of high collateral demands by banks. Little extension services being provided to rice farmers. Small scale rice farmers finding it difficult to compete with rice importers because of low pricing scheme for imported rice. Inputs (fertilizers) and tools are expensive. Lack of storage facilities – rice harvested are poorly stored thus creating post-harvest losses and limited access to machineries to expand production.

The pathways preferred – are among others – a strong need for financing windows for rice producers and farmers to access through low interest rates, long term repayments and minimal collaterals. Government's extension officers should actively provide services to farmers while Government is requested to institute fair pricing schemes for locally grown & imported rice varieties.

Appeals were made to the Government to have reduction in prices on basic farming inputs (fertilizers), investments in building food storages across Liberia to prevent post-harvest losses and the provision of farming machineries to rice farmers.

Cassava

This is Liberia's second staple and an important driver of the country's food systems. Farmers in this sector identified a number of hinderances. Among those impediments are the lack of land preparation machineries for cassava planting to expand production; limited access to high-yield cassava varieties, processing machines, preservatives and storage facilities that will help boost production.

As this food crop is important to Liberia, farmers seek to have more direct Government's support – through collaborative partnerships with donors and private sector actors to chart new sustainable ways in enhancing production.

Particularly, farmers called for investments in procuring land preparation machineries; production of various cassava planting varieties through strengthening of Central Agriculture Research Institute (CARI) and a national policy to have bakeries use 10% of locally produced cassava flour.

Oil Palm

Like other food products, this important crop is faced with many challenges which are limited access and unavailability of mini processing plants to refined oil palm into several products that are important sources of food nutrients and cosmetics. With the growing number of smallholder farmers in this sector where they cannot compete with large multinational corporations operating in Liberia, the need to have more investments in refined mills to support and expand the production capacities of smallholder farmers.

Horticulture

Most Liberian households in rural parts have some sort of vegetable home gardens and involved in vegetable production, but sourcing high-yield vegetable seeds and availability of cooling storage facilities are causes which hinder vegetable production in Liberia. Those in the horticulture sector have raised their voices for local access and affordable seeds and investments in establishing vegetable cooling storages in the country which are non-existent.

Livestock

This sector has limited attention to ensure its development. Actors complained of lack of a national policies to guide the sector's development amidst huge competition from importers of livestock products as well as scarcity of locally grown animal feeds. Livestock farmers identified insufficient manpower to handle animal health issues and extension services. However, as ways of activating the sector, calls for national livestock policies, livestock machineries and readily supplies of local animal feeds that will help expand their production capabilities were strongly emphasized.

Cocoa

Lack of state regulated pricing regimes for cocoa beans for a win-win between farmers and buyers and the non-existent of a local cocoa quality certification poses slow growth for this viable crop. Cocoa farmers called for a regulated pricing systems and institution of a national certification system which will be acceptable internationally.

Subtheme	2. The Food Value Chain: What are constraints face food processors from seeds to markets; existing policies for inclusive value chains and agricultural innovation towards sustainable food security and nutrition, improved livelihoods and resilience?
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There are enthusiasms among Liberians – from those in white collar jobs to those in the informal employment sector – for food production through varieties of food value chains. There has been a surge in the number of Liberian agribusinesses especially from the COVID pandemic.

One key cross-cutting issue is the limited access to financing, but with the intervention of the Government, through multilateral partners like the International Foundation for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank, there are windows of opportunities for smallholder agribusinesses to access financing through matching grants.

However, there are many constraints identified that continue to pin down growth in agribusinesses development in Liberia.

Key among those challenged articulated during the dialogues are poorly equipped standard laboratory to test food quality, limited capacities of farmers to produce on large commercial scale because most of the farmers are engaged in subsistence farming instead of mechanized agriculture.

A number of ways forward were identified to ensure that food processing, through agribusinesses, becomes key to Liberia's sustainable food security, nutrition and improved livelihoods.

They are:

- a) *An Affirmative National Action Plan to support value chain development of food crops.*
- b) *Establishment of access to markets and creating linkages among farmers and processors.*
- c) *Creation of a database of farmers who have the capacity to produce and supply large quantities of food crops for processing.*
- d) *More state's investments need to be made to upgrade the country's only National Standard Laboratory to meet quality and international standards for local consumption and food export.*
- e) *Government's incentives for rice processors to allow them purchase enough paddy for their various rice mills so more commercial quantities of local rice can be processed for local consumption.*

Subtheme	3. How to ensure rural women's economic empowerment in food value chain development
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Women play a pivotal role in agriculture, providing 80 percent of agricultural labour, and rural women constitute the majority of that workforce. The role of women in Liberia's food systems have not been significantly highlighted as it should be.

The dialogues focused on the constraints women continue to experience towards achieving the sustainable development goals number two Zero Hunger by 2030.

Despite an increasing supply of gender disaggregated data and studies of women's roles in agricultural production and food security, there is still a lack of sufficient data and information on women's active involvement in food security. The roles of women are "invisible".

The gender policy document on guiding, protecting and supporting women's active participation in food production is outdated.

Women lack sufficient access to agricultural resources. Women generally have less access to resources than men. In most instances, they have insufficient access to land, agricultural inputs and technology, training and extension, marketing services among others.

Village Savings Loan Associations (VSLA) are not adequately supportive to allow women have access to finance that will allow them participate in food production.

Insufficient business development support for women to allow them fully engage sustainable and commercially viable food production.

In directing a new course towards women playing active roles, a number of recommendations and clear pathways have been outlined that include the following:

- a) ***Gender policy document must be updated to support women's fullest participation in all sectors of agriculture.***
- b) ***Women must have unhindered accesses to basic support and resources – access to arable land through titled ownerships, financial loans and grants, market linkages, technological, training and extension services.***
- c) ***Existing VSLAs' regulations and policies must be favorable for women to ensure that they have access to loans with low interest rates at the village levels.***
- d) ***There must be business development services available to women throughout Liberia to ensure that they are involved in agribusinesses and food production to grow and thrive.***

Subtheme	4. Establishing the first national food bank for Liberia. What are the opportunities and benefits to our food systems in an event of disruptions or shocks in global food supply chain?
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Liberia, as a country which greatly relies on imported food, has not a food reserve that will contain locally grown food crops in the case of uncertainties and disruptions in the global food supply chain during emergencies – pandemic and natural disasters from exporting countries.

The locals also focused on discussions of having food reserve (s) established, but key constraints were named among others are:

- a) ***Nonexistent multisectoral approach and coordination among farmers, producers, processors and policy makers in the food value chains to have a food reserve established.***
- b) ***Challenges in capturing accurate data on our food production in various counties to determine what we have to be able to quantify our food stocks.***
- c) ***Changing public perception from considering the national food reserve as food warehousing infrastructure which are two different and distinct agricultural facilities.***
- d) ***Limited local sectoral actors' knowledge of the ECOWAS Regional Food Security Reserve Strategy adopted by the Authority of Heads of State and Government in 2013.***

But the opportunities are there to have a food reserve.

- a) ***Set up a National Multisectoral Coordination Framework to include farmers, producers, processors and policy makers in the food value chains.***
- b) ***Strengthen the existing statistical unit at the MOA to work with farmers and producers to collect accurate quarterly data on our food production to be able to feed into the food reserve***

LIBERIA DIALOGUES' PATHWAYS

- c) *Embark on a national awareness campaign that will have public agreement to support a national food reserve.*
- d) *A National Food Reserve Strategy should be drawn from the ECOWAS' version to have more domestic touches that will be acceptable to Liberian state and local actors.*

Theme Ending Youth Unemployment Through Agriculture: A Case for Liberia

UN FSS Action Track #	4	Advance equitable livelihoods
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Opportunities

Liberia has a youthful population constituting more than half of the country's population. Youth plays a critical role in the future of agriculture; however, they need support to unlock their potentials. Empowering Liberian youth to invest in agriculture and food systems is key to achieving sustainable food security, reducing youth unemployment, combating distress migration, and making agriculture more efficient, sustainable, and resilient.

During the dialogues, it was revealed that most young people under 35 are reluctant to engage in agriculture or food systems development owing to many factors which among others include:

- a) *Not considering or thinking of agriculture as profitable*
- b) *Limited knowledge on farming*
- c) *Perception of agriculture for only illiterate elders.*

Some solutions were advanced to have:

- a) *Youths who have prospered in agriculture be showcased to other youths as case studies through their testimonies that agriculture or food production is profitable. More sensitization should be undertaken through peer-to-peer engagement methods to portray the importance of agriculture and food production among them will allow youths to get actively involved.*
- b) *Youth desks should be created at state-owned institutions – involved in food systems – that will be focal points to engage youths and encourage their involvements.*
- c) *Communal leaders must designate arable lands in their respective locals for youths to own and engage in agriculture.*
- d) *Financial institutions should be encouraged to lend to youths who have proven capabilities of doing farming and supporting food production.*

Theme Mitigating Climate Impacts on Liberian Farmers

UN FSS Action Track #	5	Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress
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Opportunities:

Liberia's has rich forest in terms of biodiversity and is considered a global conservation hotspot. It occupies approximately 6.6 million ha of lowland tropical forests 43% of the Upper Guinea forests of West Africa. But Liberia stands at a disadvantage point in climate change. This continues to affect the country's farming systems thus having the propensity to cause low food production. Liberia has little access to climate financing to ensure that farmers and those in food production build resiliences.

Subtheme	Climate change impacts and adaptation among smallholder farmers in Liberia and the effects on our food systems
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Variations in weather patterns and climate conditions are grossly impacting Liberia's food systems. There were several hinderances of climate change highlighted during the dialogues.

LIBERIA DIALOGUES' PATHWAYS

Key among them include: There are disruptions in food production thus affecting the qualities and quantities of crops resulting into reduced yields as a consequence of extreme weather conditions; variations resulting into extreme weather patterns are causing prevalence of diseases and pests' infestation on food production and livestock breeding; high weather conditions causing changes in water temperatures which continuously pose risks to the development of aquatic species; and in the end, Liberia suffers from shortages of fishery products.

While farmers and food actors are severely being impacted by climate variations, there is limited access to climatic information as to what time farmers can plant and harvest and Liberia still lacks national adaptation policy for farmers and those in food production.

Four key mitigating measures were outlined:

- a) ***Farmers should be educated on and motivated to do intercropping (mixed crops planting on one land).***
- b) ***The state-owned research institute – CARI – be encouraged to produce climate and disease resilient seeds to be given to farmers while restocking of our livestock must be done.***
- c) ***A need to monitor our aquatic sector and provide weather information to those farmers involved in aquaculture.***
- d) ***Meteorological stations must be erected in various counties and provide weather information readily to farmers.***
- e) ***Liberia needs to access various international climate financing to be fully utilized for farmers to adapt to climate variations to ensure constant food supplies.***

Theme Sourcing Home Grown Food to Boost Nutrition in Liberia

UN FSS Action Track # 1 Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all

Opportunities

Liberia is the only country in the Northern Guinea Forest that is 100% Tropical rain-forest bound. Liberia has more than one type of vegetation: -Tropical rain-forest, Sudan Sahel, Savannah and Transition region. The tropical rain-forest's soil which is spread across most parts of the country gives rise to organic food production.

As a country which depends on imported processed food products – most likely could be expired products – are not healthy for consumption and there are huge potentials for local grown food crops to be cultivated and form part of our nutritional programs – infants feeding and school feeding activities.

The dialogues identified and agreed to promote and constantly consume local food crops to boost nutrition in Liberia. One particular challenge disclosed at the dialogues is the limited knowledge of Liberians in the organic richness of our locally grown food.

Key actions proposed to start the use of locally food crops in our nutritional program include:

- ***Public awareness campaigns at health centers for child bearing mothers to start the use of local food to enhance their children nutrition.***
- ***Information materials should be available on the preparations of those local foods that are rich in minerals required for healthy consumption.***
- ***International non-governmental organizations involved in school feeding should be encouraged to set up school gardens where local food can be grown and sourced to add to the school feeding baskets.***