



NGO Coalition
of Liberia



**Rethinking Liberia's Forests:
Implementing the new vision
6-7 October 2015
Paynesville Town Hall**

Conference Report

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Authorship

This report was drafted by Global Witness and reviewed by the Liberian Government Forestry Development Authority, the NGO Coalition of Liberia, and Rights and Resources Initiative. Global Witness is responsible for the publication of this report.

Abbreviations

CFA	Community Forest Associations (Kenya)	LoI	Norway – Liberia Letter of Intent
CFDC	Community Forestry Development Committee	LRA	Land Rights Act
CFMA	Community Forest Management Agreement	LRCFP	Land rights and community forestry program
CIFOR	Center for International Forestry Research	LTA	Liberia Timber Association
CRL	Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands	MLME	Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	MoA	Ministry of Agriculture
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency	NFLF	National Forests and Landscape Forum
EU	European Union	NFRL	National Forest Reform Law
FAO	Food and Agriculture organisation	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
FDA	Forestry Development Authority	NTFP	Non-timber forest products
FLEGT	Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade	PROSPER	People, rules, & organisations supporting protection of ecosystem resources
GIS	Geographical Information Systems	PUP	Private Use Permit
GoL	Government of Liberia	RSPO	Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil
IFRI	International Forestry Resources and Institutions Research Network	RRI/RRG	Rights and Resources Initiative / Group
KFS	Kenya Forest Service	SDI	Sustainable Development Institute
LAS	Legality Assurance System	TFA	Tropical Forestry Alliance
LC/A	Land Commission (future Land Agency)	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
		VPA	Voluntary Partnership Agreement

1 Introduction

A conference on rethinking Liberia's forests: implementing the new vision was originally conceived in March 2014 during discussions between Forestry Development Authority (FDA) and Global Witness. Once the conference had been decided upon as a positive and necessary step forward for Liberia, key stakeholders – including the Land Commission, the NGO Coalition of Liberia, USAID, and the Rights and Resources Initiative – were invited to form a planning committee. The devastating Ebola outbreak prevented the conference from happening in 2014, but it went ahead a year afterwards in October 2015.

1.1 Why rethink?

Liberia's National Forest Reform Law (NFRL) of 2006 was a ground-breaking piece of legislation. Communities in Liberia have been living in and depending upon forests for generations, but the NFRL, and the 2009 Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands (CRL), formalised a number of principles and practices of benefit to communities. These included procedural rights to information, participation, and benefit sharing. The laws also took the first steps towards substantive rights, enabling communities to take direct control of and manage forest resources.

The policy landscape has continued to evolve, and those planning the conference felt it was important to recognise the progress that has been made in recent years – in terms of policy, legislation, implementation and initiatives – and to take stock. Key developments have included:

- Since 2007 USAID has been supporting community forestry in Liberia, first through the Land rights and community forestry program (LRFCF) and currently through People, rules, & organisations supporting protection of ecosystem resources program (PROSPER). PROSPER *“introduces, operationalizes, and refines appropriate models for community management of forest resources for local self-governance and enterprise development”*,¹ in particular with reference to the Community Forest Management Agreements (CFMAs). The US has committed US\$19.4 million to these two programmes.²
- In 2012 Liberia and the European Union (EU) signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) that committed Liberia to put in place systems to eliminate illegal timber from domestic or international markets, and equally committed the EU to take measures to prevent timber of illegal origin to enter its market. The VPA also has important governance objectives, including a time-bound commitment to implement a list of legal reforms. It also triggered significant donor support to the sector.
- In 2012 it came to the attention of H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf that 63 Private Use Permits (PUPs) were misused, thereby illegally granting over two million hectares of land. As President Johnson Sirleaf wrote in her speech given to the conference, *“we have taken pragmatic and firm steps recognising the breakdown in the rule of law in the forest sector and the consequent harm to the national interest”*.³ These steps have included a decisive switch in emphasis that now prioritises conservation and community management.
- In 2013 the Government of Liberia (GoL) committed to fundamental reforms to land tenure through the Land Rights Policy.⁴ As Dr Brandy, Chairman of the Liberian Land Commission, said in his opening remarks, *“For the first time, and based on our broad consultations, the policy recognises community land rights and establishes a distinct category of community land rights”*. The policy commits most land that was previously considered public land to become community, customary land, thus recognising and securing customary tenure. The draft Land Rights Act (LRA) to implement this policy is currently being deliberated upon in Liberia's legislature.
- In 2014 the governments of Liberia and Norway signed a joint Letter of Intent (LoI) that seeks *“to achieve economic growth without deforestation and forest degradation”*.⁵ Measures to be implemented by Liberia in the initial phase of the LoI include refraining from issuing any new logging concessions – or CFMAs backed by companies – until all concessions have been reviewed by an independent body; piloting direct payments to communities for protecting forests; and introducing an overarching strategy for the allocation of protected areas and agricultural concessions.⁶ Norway committed up to US\$150 million in support of implementing the LoI.

- Development of the regulatory framework continues apace. At the last count, some 16 regulations or guidelines are at different stages of development.⁷ Some of these have particular resonance for a new vision of the sector, including harmonisation of the CRL with its regulation and the VPA, timber from agricultural and mining concessions, chain saw milling, revised fiscal policy, and rules for complaints mechanisms and conflict resolution.
- Over 100 applications for CFMAs have been received by the FDA and over 80 have passed the first step of the nine-step approval process. The GoL and the EU “*recognise the importance of a robust process*” and also recognise that “*the shift towards community forest management will be a major change for the forest sector*”⁸, requiring capacity, financial resources, and support from the FDA.

1.2 Why a conference?

The conference had the objective to **develop a shared vision for Liberia's forests, and to create practical plans to implement this vision**. The conference set out to consider the recent changes in policy and implementation, and to build a consensus on what the sector should look like in future. This required updates on the state of the forest resource and current initiatives within Liberia, as well looking outside Liberia to see what we could learn from other countries and international experts about forest management best practise. The conference divided the task into four themes:

1. **Resources and governance:** What can we learn from holistically assessing Liberia's forest resources? What regulations currently govern the forest sector, and what legal frameworks are emerging? How can we build upon traditional/Indigenous systems of forest management?
2. **Local realities for communities and forests:** How are local communities utilising the non-cash, intangible goods and services provided by Liberia's forests? What are the opportunities and threats they face in this endeavour? What can be learned from other countries with similar experiences?
3. **Real and potential initiatives:** How can experiences in Liberia inform locally-controlled forest management on a wider scale? What can we learn from regional and global examples on this and in other areas, including the balance of timber and non-timber activities?
4. **Institutions:** How might a forest authority, other government agencies, NGOs and other intermediaries best support sustainable and legal community forest and land management?

The organizers also felt that a national conference would provide a chance for key forestry stakeholders to come together and decide on the direction that Liberia's forests should take. To this end, the conference sought to be as participatory as possible, with over 200 attendees, including representatives from community based organisations, government stakeholders, local and international NGO's, and a number of international experts in the field of forest management.

Held over two days, the conference involved 19 presentations given by experts from both Liberia and other relevant countries such as Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mexico. In particular, FDA officials were key to the success of the conference. Managing Director Hon. Harrison Karnwea set a positive tone in the opening ceremony and commended the work of the conference in the closing ceremony. FDA staff presented or chaired five of the six sessions. The conference was also honoured to hear a speech read on behalf of President Johnson Sirleaf, as well as speeches from US Ambassador Deborah Malac, EU Ambassador Tiina Intelmann; Second Secretary to the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Accra, Ingrid Buli; President of the Rights and Resources Initiative, Andy White; and Chairman of the Land Commission, Dr Othello Brandy.

1.3 The conference output

The main output of the conference was a consolidated set of highlighted future actions. These were developed by all conference participants during two break-out sessions. The topic of the first of these sessions was “what needs to be done to rethink Liberia's forests and implement a new vision?” while the second session focused on a “draft practical action plans for implementing a new vision”. During each break-out session the participants were divided into five groups of approximately 50 participants each. These groups divided their suggestions across eight themes: resources, livelihoods, capacity, policy,

participation, gender, technical support, and synergies with other sectors. The full list of highlighted future actions, consolidated from the five break-out groups by a small multi-stakeholder team, can be found in the Annex to this document.

2 What the conference discussed

Discussions in the conference were divided into four themes. For this reason, the following summary of the conference presentations and participant questions and answers are also divided into the four themes.

2.1 Resources and governance

Conference theme: What can we learn from holistically assessing Liberia's forest resources? What regulations currently govern the forest sector, and what legal frameworks are emerging (including land tenure legislation)? How can we build upon traditional/Indigenous systems of forest management?

Any consideration of the forest sector needs to start from three foundations: (1) What do we have in terms of forest resources? (2) How are we governing forests through current policy and legislation? (3) How have our forests been governed in the past?

Brand new data on Liberia's forest cover was presented to the conference, which will be a valuable tool in forest land use planning and gives us a good understanding of the Liberia's forest resources. In contrast, data on informal forest economies and non-monetised forest goods and services is lacking in Liberia, as it is in many other countries, making it hard to quantify the exact value of forests. There was also discussion of the draft LRA, which is currently under negotiation and will have profound implications for the forest sector and for community land rights. Unfortunately no speaker was identified to present traditional systems of forest management in Liberia, despite this originally being an integral part of the agenda.

Saah A. David Jr, the National REDD+ Project Coordinator at the FDA chaired the session comprising six diverse presentations. In his opening remarks he emphasised that *"We are not here to rethink the whole sector, nor are we developing a new policy. We are here to check that the path that we are on is correct"*. This followed a series of important opening remarks, including from Hon. Karnwea, who said *"As we speak to you, national legal and policy processes are underway, and new initiatives and projects are forthcoming in the forest sector, with the rights and interests of the local community at the centre stage"*.

Ignatius K. Jaye from the FDA GIS team was able to present data drawn from the new forest cover assessment, based on 2014-15 satellite imagery.⁹ This showed that some 84% of Liberia is covered by forest, and confirms that indeed 43% of the remaining Guinea Forest Ecosystem, a recognised global biodiversity hotspot and priority for conservation, is in Liberia.¹⁰ The assessment team were not yet able to present a detailed analysis of forest cover change over the years since the previous assessment in 2004, but it is hoped that this data will be available soon.

Conservation International Country Director, Jessica Donovan-Allen, highlighted the role forests play in preserving human wellbeing and the need to preserve them for this reason. She also made a strong case for community-based conservation that seeks to improve people's lives while protecting forest resources.¹¹

A key topic was the LRA, which is hoped to be passed imminently. In his opening speech, Andy White, Coordinator of the Rights and Resources Initiative, emphasized that *"The future of the forest sector is of course, highly dependent upon the future of land rights...world history shows that strong family and community forest ownership has been the basis for most of the world's sustainable forest conservation and production, and globally competitive forest industries"*.¹² In his opening speech, Land Commission Chairman Dr Brandy outlined two significant features of the 2013 Land Rights Policy and the current draft LRA: the recognition of customary land rights and community land ownership; and the recognition of the rights of communities to self-identify, to organise, and to govern.

This was further detailed by presentations from Stanley Toe of the Land Commission and Ali D. Kaba of the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI). Mr. Toe explained that the consultations informing the Land Rights Policy had decisively recognised that occupancy or use rights were insufficient, and that community

ownership rights would be needed in order to ensure Liberia's peaceful and equitable economic development. Mr. Kaba stated that 40% of Liberia's total land area is under agriculture, forestry, or mining concessions, yet the country has to spend over US\$220 million a year on rice and other food imports.¹³ He pointed out the lack of free, prior and informed consent of affected communities and the consequent overlapping claims, and how insecure tenure reduces overall land productivity and complicates investor relations. Jim Smyle, author of a key World Bank diagnostic report on the Liberia forest sector,¹⁴ added that forestry in many countries has a disappointing track record whereby regulations that are supposed to target people are, in fact, undermining development and governance, and recognition of land rights is key to changing this.¹⁵

During questions from the participants there was much discussion on the slow progress the LRA has made through the legislature and the urgency to pass the law. Some felt the consultation process on the draft law had been insufficient despite its key tenets being in the 2013 Land Rights Policy. The message from some community members was heard loud and clear that new policies, laws and initiatives such as the CMFAs will not deliver results on the ground unless community members have much greater opportunity to be involved in decision-making.

The presentation from Jim Smyle on the need to frame forest policy and regulations more around desired outcomes, and less around control or inputs provided a good summary of the substance covered by the other presentations. Thus overall this first session showed us the need to have the right 'rules' in place, and in order for these rules to have legitimacy they must involve citizen stakeholders. Secure land tenure, as well as different rules for different property types, were also highlighted as underpinning the effectiveness of rules and the success of the outcome.

2.2 Local realities for communities and forests

Conference theme: How are local communities utilising the non-cash, intangible goods and services provided by Liberia's forests? What are the opportunities and threats they face in this endeavour? What can be learned from other countries with similar experiences?

The second session detailed the ways in which different users of the forest, from large commercial operators to ordinary farmers, collectors and traders of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), and those – such as charcoal producers and pit-sawyers – who are challenged by the current legal framework but nonetheless contribute to livelihoods and the economy. The session was chaired by Jonathan Yiah from SDI.

Rudolph Merab of the Liberia Timber Association made the case for industry, pointing out that forest loss over the decades has been low and the sector has not yet reached the levels of the 1980s regarding formal employment. Thus he argued there was the potential for expansion of commercial operations.

Independent researcher Matthias Rhein, author of *Industrial palm oil development: Liberia's path to sustained economic development and shared prosperity?*,¹⁶ challenged this perspective, asserting that every successful economy had an initial phase where they protected small businesses and their local economy whilst emphasizing local tenure, rather than relying directly to big industry to generate revenues for the country. He said, "Specializing in commodity production while simultaneously working on an industrial scale will not be successful in the long term". With evidence from Indonesia, Europe and the US, he argued that two commonly-held perceptions are incorrect:

- (1) Large-scale operations do not contribute more to GDP; in reality it is small enterprises that contribute the most to a nation's economy.
- (2) More jobs do not come from industrial forestry and agriculture concessions; in fact it is small-scale mixed agriculture and forestry operations that generate the most jobs for local communities.

David Young, of Global Witness introduced a series of studies from around the world that sought to identify and quantify the hidden values of forests and their contribution to the informal and non-cash local economies.¹⁷ When forests are lost after logging or conversion to monocrop agricultural concessions, studies show that there are real and measurable economic costs. However, there are large gaps in terms of

the information available relating to the informal economy that need to be addressed in order to inform rational decisions about forest and land use management.

The next presentation in Session Two made a clear argument for more concerted efforts to include and enable women as decision-makers on forest issues. Julie Weah, Director of the Foundation for Community Initiatives, showed that women are major contributors to the forest economy, but in contrast often lack access to or control over forest resources.¹⁸

The final presentations for this session provided perspectives from some of the small-scale forest users. A joint presentation from Kolly Allison, Facilitator for the Forest and Farm Facility in Liberia, and Julius Bass, National Coordinator of the Farmers Union Network of Liberia, focused on the importance of NTFPs to the local economy and in particular how they play a key role in filling gaps in the seasonality of other income and food sources.¹⁹

The last presentation was from Alexander T. Cole, representing the Alliance for Rural Democracy²⁰. Mr. Cole expressed the view that for almost 40 years, the FDA and the industry have been focused on logging rather than forests. He said this was under-utilising the totality of the forest resources and benefits, and that it contributed to the marginalisation of forest dependent communities. In contrast, *“for local informal forest entrepreneurs the forest is their department stores, supermarkets, pharmacies, banks, their wall streets and world trade centers, universities, research centers, etc.”*²¹ He echoed the need for better data on the contribution made by the informal sector, including pit-sawing, round poles, NTFPs and charcoal in order that these sub-sectors are better recognised.

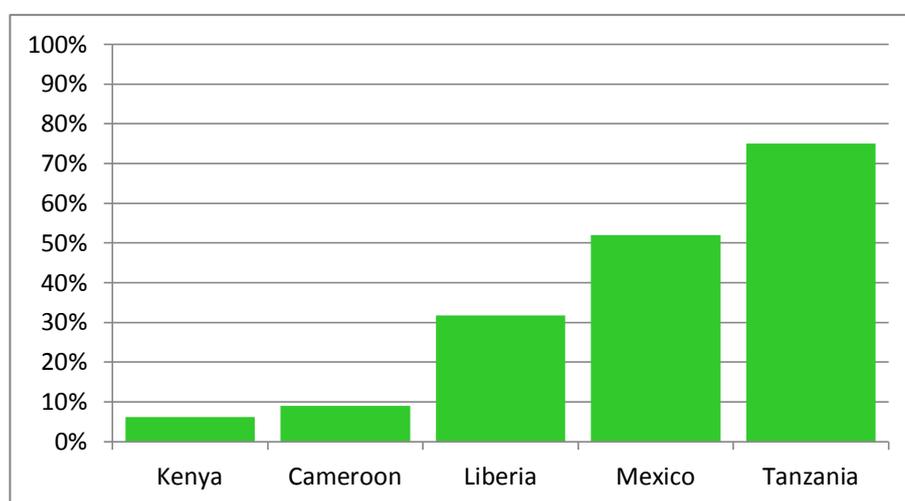
Overall, the conference sought not to choose one form of forest management or source of forest products in favour of others, but rather to focus on tenure issues and other ways to sustainably manage the resource. The term “smallholder growth-ism” was coined as the audience highlighted a genuine concern for export-orientated commodity-led growth and expressed a strong desire for better data in order to make choices between alternative economic pathways. Concern was expressed that a deficit in knowledge will lead to poor policy-making, and the lack of a more holistic understanding of the goods and services Liberia's forests provide is likely to result in poor outcomes for forests and communities. It is encouraging to see that since the conference, new international guidance on measuring the multiple roles of forests in household welfare and livelihoods have been published by FAO and others.²²

2.3 Real and potential initiatives

Conference theme: How can experiences in Liberia inform locally-controlled forest management on a wider scale? What can we learn from regional and global examples on this and in other areas, including the balance of timber and non-timber activities?

The third session aimed to examine community forestry initiatives from around the world. It was chaired by Gertrude Wede Korvayan Nyaley, Technical Manager of the Community Forestry Department in the FDA.

The rights of communities to be informed, participate, give or withhold consent, receive shares in benefits, and to own and manage forests is context-specific and varies between countries. In her opening remarks reflecting on FLEGT-VPA progress, EU Ambassador Tiina Intelmann noted that *“managing forests by communities requires significant investment and time for developing social*



Proportion of land owned by or designated for indigenous peoples and local communities

*governance, business and managerial skills, and technical and-environmental management capacity”.*²³

This session provided insights from community forestry initiatives in Kenya, Cameroon, Liberia, Mexico and Tanzania. The chart on the previous page shows the proportion of the land in each country that is owned by or designated for indigenous peoples and local communities.²⁴

The Liberian perspective on Community Forestry was given by Saye Thompson, the Chair of Zor and Gba Joint Forestry Management Body in Nimba County. This CFMA was one of the first to be formed in 2011, following two years of preliminary discussion between communities, the FDA and the ArcelorMittal mining company, facilitated by a USAID project and Flora and Fauna International. The primary concern of the CFMA is conservation, and Community Forest Guards patrol the forest. NTFPs are harvested and there is also the potential for low impact small-scale timber enterprise development. The community has a forest management plan that allows forest products to be harvested by community members with a permit. He identified eco-tourism and *“practical and sustainable farming systems such as agroforestry”* as areas where his community needs technical assistance, and the need for GoL support to enforce regulations and rules to prevent encroachment. Mr. Thompson pointed out that since this initiative has begun the community is now better able to represent its interests and negotiate, including in county development forums.

Stephen Kahunyo, an Assistant Director in the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) presented the concept of participatory forest management in Kenya. It was first introduced in 1997 and became formalised after the 2005 Forest Act included Community Forest Associations (CFA) as the means by which communities can enter into forest management agreements with local authorities. Mr. Kahunyo emphasised that the success of this model is due to these communities receiving many benefits from sustainably managing the forests, serving as a strong incentive to manage the resources well. He implied there remained an issue in that access to decision-making, revenue streams, and overall resource control rights remain vested in the KFS. It is also notable that, according to RRI, 31% of Liberia is owned by or designated for indigenous peoples and local communities, whereas for Kenya the figure is only 6% (see chart on Page 7).

Cassian Sianga, of the Tanzania Natural Resource Forum, described community-based forest management in that country. Mr. Sianga indicated that the 1998 Forest Policy and a 2002 Forest Act aimed to *“target communities not as passive beneficiaries but as forest managers, in all aspects of forest management such as forest protection, regulation of access and use of the forest, and actions to rehabilitate or develop the productive capacity of the forest”*.²⁵ Thus the forest authority's role has changed from *“policemen – restricting communities from getting involved in forest management and utilization and excluding them from reserved forest areas”* to *“partners with communities, advising them on how they can best manage their forests in the short and long term”* and *“assisting villagers to identify, survey and manage their own forests for the benefit of the community as a whole”*. He predicted that in the next two to three years there will be no more public forest land, as most areas will have secure community tenure as Village Forest Land Reserves. The draft LRA in Liberia makes similar provisions.

Francisco Chapela of Mexico was unfortunately unable to travel to Liberia, and so his presentation was given by Jim Smyle. Timber production in Mexico has a long and chequered history, including an agrarian revolution in 1910 in response to large Haciendas (farms) being owned by foreign investors. Mr. Chapela's speech reported how *“Poor understanding of the underlying ecological processes which make sustainable production possible and lack of clearly perceived benefits to local communities, made concessionary business increasingly less profitable”*,²⁶ leading by the 1980s to an 'enclave economy' that was bankrupted by poor forest management and unsecure tenure. This provided an opportunity for community forestry, mixing traditional knowledge with business systems, and recognising that communities are the best stewards of the resource and can also making their living from it. The presentation concluded, *“By far, Community Forestry in Mexico is the most cost effective way to Reduce carbon Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD)”*.²⁷

The final presentation in this session was from Cameroon, which has a less successful community forestry story to tell. Justin Kamga explained that even though the legal basis was laid down in 1994, so far only 379 community forestry agreements have been signed and another 560 are awaiting approval. As in Kenya, the Cameroon model provides for the right to be involved in management, but not to own forest lands. Whilst in theory community forestry provides a means for local control of development – and there are successes

such as investments in school construction and staffing – there are many constraints. The complex process to obtain community forestry rights provides opportunities for rent-seeking by elites and bureaucrats. This inflates the already high costs (US\$10-15,000 for a 'simple' forest management plan for 5,000 ha) and can often force communities to initiate commercial logging sub-contracts in order to recoup this money. This may also drive illegality, as communities (or community elites) find it easier to conspire with illegal chainsaw operators to earn an income from their customary forest, than to start down the formal community forestry road. Thus Mr. Kanga concluded, *"The clarification of tenure rights is a prerequisite of an effective community forestry and sustainable forest management"*.²⁸

2.4 Institutions

Conference theme: How might a forest authority, other government agencies, NGOs and other intermediaries best support sustainable and legal community forest and land management?

The final session provided an opportunity to the FDA to present the direction in which it will continue to evolve as the leading Government of Liberia agency responsible for the sector. This presentation was alongside two others – one providing some general lessons from many countries, and one focusing on Kenya. The session was chaired by Abraham Guillen, who as the Team Leader of the VPA Support Unit plays a key role in reforming and strengthening the FDA, private sector, CSOs and community institutions in Liberia.

The FDA presentation was given by Darlington S. Tuagben, the Deputy Managing Director responsible for Operations. He reminded the audience that respect for community rights was a key reform introduced in the 2006 NFRL and led to the incorporation of communities as one of the "three C's" – indeed this has formed the basis of the structure of the FDA, into Commercial, Conservation and Community departments. In response to a question from the audience, Managing Director Karnwea elaborated on a key evolution since 2006: *"The future of forestry in Liberia is completely with CFMAs, so the FDA cannot issue any agreement without communities taking the first step. No more Forest Management Contracts will be granted. The present law reform and land reform processes are ongoing, we have the Land Rights Law before the national legislature so no concession can be granted until this is over"*.

Andy White gave a presentation on forest agencies in transition,²⁹ on behalf of Sally Collins, former Associate Chief of the US Forest Service, who was unable to travel to Liberia. The presentation illustrated the key ways in which forest agencies are having to respond to historic changes in the sector, towards greater diversity of ownership and management purposes (less commercial timber production and more ecosystem services), and the science and economics that underpins this – including climate change, traditional knowledge, and public goods. The presentation concluded with a line written by eight former heads of forest agencies: *"Clearly this century will bring unprecedented changes to the world's forests. Forest agencies can positively influence this future or be casualties of it"*.³⁰

The final presentation was from Oscar Simanto, the Head of Forestry Extension Management for the Kenya Forestry Service. He explained how the KFS is *"Moving from command and control to more participatory processes which enhance community participation"* in recognition that the CFAs described in the previous session by Stephen Kahunyo – and of which there are now 325 throughout the country – are central to forest management in Kenya. He added *"there is serious need to shift evaluation of forest programmes to also measure their contributions to the improvement of peoples livelihoods rather than concentrate on the number of trees"*.³¹

Overall the session provided useful food-for-thought on how the FDA is leading the cycle of implementing, reviewing and improving the way they manage forests, as well as where it is adapting to new circumstances and challenges. As in Kenya, the FDA has recognised the value in improved government-community-civil society relationships and in civil society coalitions that put pressure on government to respond to issues. Questions from the audience were directed to the FDA asking what more will it do in the future to improve the sector.

3 Conclusions

The two days of discussion highlighted the significant challenges faced by all those working in the sector. Profound changes to the rights and responsibilities of different stakeholder groups are happening, in particular as a consequence of the Land Rights Policy and draft law, and the emphasis on community forestry. The large number of CFMA applications need to be processed to filter out any illegitimate ones – but equally important is to ensure that community applications have adequate support in each of the nine stages in their establishment. The FDA and many others are acutely aware that a dramatic increase in land rights claims, cutting corners in the VPA legality assurance system, or permitting large numbers and areas of CFMAs will be counter-productive and could risk repeating mistakes of the past.

However, there is also a lot of positive momentum in Liberia's forestry sector, and participants encouraged the Government of Liberia to maintain its efforts to pass the LRA, implement the VPA and continue careful piloting of CFMAs. Indeed, the conference demonstrated that significant political will for reform continues to exist at the top of the Government. As articulated in a speech read during the conference's closing ceremony on behalf of President Johnson Sirleaf. Dr Edward McClain, Minister of State for Presidential Affairs, stated that *"our administration remains committed to protecting our people and ensuring that our natural resources are used to benefit the country and communities in which those resources are found"*.³²

Liberia's international partners also continue to provide Liberia with significant support – led by Norway through its Lol, the US through ongoing and forthcoming projects, and the EU/UK through the FLEGT process and VPA Support Unit. All those involved, led by the FDA and Land Commission, should ensure that these initiatives are manageable, and don't allow them to develop faster than the political and technical infrastructure to administer them effectively. The conference also heard much about the need for more resources and capacity, so it is critically important that these initiatives are designed in an inclusive way to meet their aims and monitored to keep them on track.

The conference was able to accommodate more than twice as many participants as originally conceived, and in the evaluation three-quarters of respondents commended the multi-stakeholder participation. The down-side of this was that inevitably it was difficult to have in-depth discussions on any particular topic. Thus the highlighted future actions that form the most visible output of the conference can at best only emphasise the importance of continuous engagement and a willingness to learn on the part of all involved.

The Government of Liberia showed its commitment to exactly this. In the words of President Johnson Sirleaf, *"We are pleased our commitment has translated into a dramatic shift in the past two years owing to a meaningful discourse initiated on Liberia's forest sector"*, and that these actions were *"realising a window of opportunity to bring about lasting change for Liberia's forests, the communities that depend on them, and the wider community"*.

4 Recommendations

A full list of highlighted future actions developed by the conference participants can be found in the following annex. However, drawing upon this longer list of actions, the authors have reached four core recommendations:

1. The Government of Liberia, its international partners, and civil society groups, should work together to develop deeper understanding of the multiple goods, services and values that Liberia's forests offer and how to utilise their potential through documentation of traditional knowledge and applied economic research.
2. The Government should establish a multi-stakeholder, gender-inclusive steering group to encourage innovation in the community forestry sector.
3. Since the greatest threats to forests are often from outside the sector, in particular from conversion to agriculture, inter-ministerial coordination over land use planning must be improved.
4. The Government must ensure that the Land Rights Act is enacted swiftly.

References

A short film made in preparation for the conference and featuring community forestry in Liberia is available on the conference website:

www.rethinkingliberiasforests.org.

The agenda and concept note, all the conference presentations, transcripts of the speeches provided by H.E. President Johnson Sirleaf and other keynote speakers, and media coverage of the conference are also available on www.rethinkingliberiasforests.org.



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Annex: Highlighted future actions

	<i>Practical suggestions for implementation</i>	<i>Main actors responsible</i>
Policies and law	Support the passage and implementation of the draft LRA	GoL has rightly put emphasis on the passage of the LRA, and should see this enacted. The Land Commission (LC), with support from USAID, is expected to evolve into a Land Agency (LA), to lead on implementation of the LRA.
	Ensure implementation of the Community Rights Law	The FDA is leading, with assistance from the VPA Support Unit, on harmonisation and development of new regulations.
	Review and harmonize the forest laws and regulations	The LoI commits Liberia to compose an overarching strategy and legal framework to govern agricultural concessions.
Community rights and participation	Provide support for the passage of the draft LRA	GoL has rightly put emphasis on the passage of the LRA, and – supported by FDA, LC/A, CSOs – should see this enacted.
	Strengthen community participation in decision making	
	Implementation of the Community Rights Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The FDA and LC/A should continue to show leadership in providing information and enabling inclusive decision making, by acting as a neutral mediator between communities and companies. • CSOs are effective in re-packaging important information for local audiences and building confidence in communities to represent and speak for themselves.
	Develop, validate, and implement communication messages that all will easily understand regarding community rights	
	Lobbying, awareness-raising, and advocacy about community participation and community rights	
	Raise awareness around RSPO and TFA and other international instruments	
Gender inclusion	Adopt policy for gender inclusion and enforce gender related-policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GoL should continue to strengthen gender inclusiveness in all policies and direct the FDA, MoA, LC/A and other line agencies to do the same at a practical level. • International partners can provide links to best practice and experience from other parts of the world, and provide financial support. • CSOs can assist with analysis (of weak socio-economic development where gender is ignored), training and advocacy; some CSOs also need to put their own house in order.
	Mainstream gender into forest governance structures; encourage stronger gender participation with specific reference to women	
	Organise awareness raising within communities with regard to gender	
	Develop and train community structures with regard to gender	
	Train female facilitators for communities	

	<i>Practical suggestions for implementation</i>	<i>Main actors responsible</i>
Capacity	Conduct community and FDA capacity assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VPA Support Unit has led on capacity assessments and strategy development for the FDA, LTA, NGO Coalition and CFDCs. This forms a strong platform for further financial and capacity support, including from Norway and other international partners. The FDA, CSOs, small/medium private sector and communities all need to further identify technical support needs and seek funds for implementing a new vision of multi-purpose community-led forest management centred on the implications of the LRA and the CFMAs.
	Increase budgetary support for FDA	
	Increase technical capacity for both communities and FDA	
	Build capacity of FDA regarding participatory forest management of communities	
	Build FDA capacity for database management	
	Build capacity of community members on forest enterprise development	
	Create awareness on the use of NTFP	
Technical support assessment and data	Conduct a survey to capture both economic and numerical values of the forest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The FDA and USAID are in discussion on a technical assistant for data collection and management and survey design. It is expected this will significantly increase the knowledge base on the multiple goods, services and values that Liberia's forests offer, and that need to be conserved. As a public agency, the FDA needs to continue to make information available to the public it serves, including access to the Legality Assurance System (LAS) and other databases.
	Build capacity of FDA and communities in forest resource assessments	
	Open database to partners to make information accessible	
	Assess and improve existing databases for forestry management and information	
Synergies with community and government	Conduct periodic community and government forest stakeholder consultations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The FDA should lead on the implementation of open forest governance forums, through for example regular, open meetings of the National Forests and Landscape Forum (NFLF). The GoL and EU should reinforce checks and balances in the VPA LAS, including compliance with the VPA transparency annex and the role of independent forest monitoring. The LoI commits Liberia to an inter-sectoral coordination mechanism between relevant government agencies, including FDA, MLME, MoA, EPA.
	Establish mechanism for information sharing	
	Establish a monitoring mechanism to assess the enforcement of the laws	
	Regular inter-sectoral coordination amongst natural resource actors	
	Create opportunities for public, private partnership and for the balancing of the 3 Cs: Commercial, Community and Conservation	

	<i>Practical suggestions for implementation</i>	<i>Main actors responsible</i>
Resources	Provision of resources to empower communities through entrepreneurial development	GOL, INGO, private sector and partners
	Economic evaluation of natural resources	FDA, private sector Communities and International partners
Livelihoods	Provide livelihood support and incentives to promote conservation and sustainable forest management (eg. Agroforestry)	The FDA, CSOs, small/medium private sector and communities all need to further identify technical support needs and seek funds for implementing a new vision of multi-purpose community-led forest management centred on the implications of the LRA and the CFMAs and integrating (not segregating) the 3Cs.