



global witness

MAKING COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT WORK FOR LIBERIA

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
BACKGROUND	4
FINDING A WAY FORWARD	5
KNOWING THE TRUE VALUE OF LIBERIA'S FORESTS	5
SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES	7
GOVERNANCE	7
Grants for NGOs to provide governance support to communities	7
Assistance during the nine step process	7
Community Assemblies	8
CFMA hotline	8
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE	8
Database of technical advisors	8
Drafting Forest Management Plans and other legal documents	8
Resource assessment and mapping	9
University curricula	9
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FOREST BUSINESSES	10
SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS	10
DIRECTORY OF LIBERIAN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FORESTRY	10
TRADE FAIR OF SMALL-MEDIUM FOREST BUSINESSES IN LIBERIA	10
CO-OPERATIVES	12
REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS	12
NATIONAL FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY	12
COMMUNITY BASED FOREST BUSINESS RESOURCE CENTRE	13
LEARNING FROM OUTSIDE EXPERIENCE	13
Study Tours	14
Expert Visits	14
CONCLUSIONS	14
REFERENCES	15

This paper has been Authored by Global Witness, with important contributions made by Julia Christian of FERN, Abraham Guillen of Liberia's Voluntary Partnership Agreement Support Unit (VPASU), Duncan Macqueen of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Jonathan Yiah of the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Whilst Liberia is taking the initial steps on the path towards community based forest management, experience from around the world has shown that moving to community-managed forests and successful community forest businesses is a lengthy process. From putting the right policies in place, to tailored donor programming, a concerted shift by the Forestry Development Authority, civil society and communities, and the involvement of business and entrepreneurs, all sectors have a part to play in this transformation.

Liberia's rich forest wealth is of huge value and importance to the Liberian economy, but by focusing on only the commercial production of timber, Liberia may be short-changing itself. The true value of lands and forests are much higher when multiple uses are captured, yet regrettably little information exists on the full value that forests contribute to Liberia's formal and informal economies.

What we do know from experience elsewhere however, is that when communities have secure tenure and long-term, formalised control of their lands and forests they are able to capture much more value from the forest, whilst conserving the resource itself, through the development of sustainable, profitable and community controlled businesses. Robust governance structures must be in place in order for communities to be able to manage their forests successfully, ensure that rights are respected and benefits are distributed equitably. To this end, the paper advocates:

- Providing advice and support to communities throughout the process of setting up community governance structures and formalising their community forest.
- Ensuring that communities genuinely control operations in their forests: access on their own terms to legal, forest management planning, mapping and resource assessment expertise, including through a 'hotline'.
- Building a cadre of expert 'service providers' within the Forestry Development Authority, Liberian NGOs, and the private sector.
- Incorporating community based forest management in university curricula to sustain innovation and Liberian expertise.



Liberia's rich forest wealth is of huge value and importance to the Liberian economy, but by focusing on only the commercial production of timber, Liberia may be short-changing itself; the true value of lands and forests are much higher when multiple uses are captured.

- Supporting viable community-centred enterprises that can add value to forest products and services, and create sustainable rural employment.
- Forming local producer organisations and co-operatives to improve access to markets, as well as regional associations and national federations that can represent specific interests at the national level.
- Conducting study tours and expert visits as ways for Liberian community forestry practitioners to share experiences from around the globe, interact and network with leaders in community based forest management, and increase knowledge and innovation.
- Establishing a resource centre, owned by community associations, which would develop a directory of forest community businesses and host trade fairs, amongst other actions to further these aims and facilitate the formation of community based forest management networks.

This brief offers a snapshot of possibilities, intended to stimulate discussions and ideas. It is presented for consideration by project designers, implementers, donors and communities to further our shared objective of successful community based forest management that provides communities with income security, facilitates rural development, sustains forests, promotes local economies and generates tax revenues for the state.

BACKGROUND

Rethinking Liberia's Forests, the multi-stakeholder conference held in Liberia in October 2015¹ highlighted that people ascribe value to forests in many different ways and that land and forests cannot be seen as just another commodity. There is a risk that if Liberia focuses only on the commercial production of timber for the creation of material wealth, it may short-change values relating to the stewardship of natural and cultural heritage, affirmative social relationships, present and future security, creative fulfilment of potential, and a sense of identity and purpose.² The Government of Liberia, in its Agenda for Transformation, recognises that it is necessary to "integrate community, conservation and commercial aspects of forestry to sustainably contribute to reducing poverty, improving livelihoods and the quality of rural life, and increasing the ecological services provided by forests".³



For community based forest management in Liberia to succeed, this integration between people, economics and preservation of the resource must be central within every community forest.

For community based forest management (CBFM) in Liberia to succeed, this integration between people, economics and preservation of the resource must be central within every community forest. Researchers at the internationally renowned Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) define CBFM as "the governance and management of forest resources by communities, in collaboration with other stakeholders, for commercial purposes, subsistence, timber production, non-timber forest products, wildlife, conservation of biodiversity and environment, and for social and religious reasons".⁴ This is a definition that is entirely consistent with the spirit and the letter of Liberia's community forestry policy.

Evidence from around the world suggests that communities see forests as their 'supermarket' or insurance policy, able to provide livelihood essentials and providing a buffer when times are hard. For communities in tropical zones "forests are as important as or more important than agriculture"⁵ in the cash and non-cash contribution to rural livelihoods. This emphasises that forests have a vital safety net function, as reliance is also higher amongst poorer households, where there are fewer opportunities for off-farm employment, limited access to markets or lower potential for agricultural production. Communities who manage their own forests also have much better conservation results than communities that are not in charge of their own resources.⁶

The conference heard that every successful process of economic development has involved small businesses, protected the local economy and secured land tenure before opening up to international investors. Small

businesses also contribute the most to the economy, both locally and also in terms of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁷ With some 30 percent of Liberia's land covered by protected areas, commercial logging or agricultural concessions, food security is a pressing issue, and the country spends more than US\$220 million per year on food imports.⁸ Yet Liberia has plentiful rainfall and fertile soils; with the right support local farmers and entrepreneurs could utilise this potential to improve their own living standards and, in conjunction with national policies to increase Liberia's consumption of locally grown foodstuffs, reduce Liberia's dependence on food imports.

Liberia is soon to enact a Land Rights Bill, crucial and ground-breaking legislation that will see Liberia's rural communities being able to secure legally-recognised land rights through existing customary land ownership. Whereas conflicts and legal disputes associated with insecure land rights can ratchet up the cost of investment by as much as 29 times,⁹ secure land rights allow local people to make decisions on what the best and most productive use of their lands may be. Secure land rights also provide more stability for genuine investors, giving them the confidence to make long-term investments that could bring benefits to rural communities such as employment and infrastructure.



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Yet as we have seen from the Private Use Permit (PUP) crisis, and the deluge of applications for Community Forestry Management Agreements (CFMA) in recent months, community lands are highly susceptible to abuse from powerful elites and business interests. Communities need support to prevent the allocation of CFMAs from turning into a repeat of the PUP scandal, by ensuring that all CFMAs are awarded legally and without undue interference from those with a vested interest in short-term financial gain. This requires that robust community governance structures are put into place in order to ensure that community rights and access to benefits are respected.

Communities (as well as the government agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and others who support them) therefore need concrete information on the best ways to strengthen business and governance organisations, generate sustainable incomes to improve livelihoods and to ensure that they have access to adequate healthcare, education and infrastructure. This briefing seeks to provide practical suggestions and ideas for improving community forest governance, strengthening business, financial and technical CBFM skills, and protecting the economic, social and environmental values that community forests can provide for the benefit of the whole of society.



East Nimba Nature Reserve, Nimba, Liberia; © Louise Riley

FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Liberia is currently taking the initial steps on the path towards community forestry, but it will take time before communities are able to successfully manage their forests in a profitable yet sustainable way. There are fears across the sector that CFMAs could become just another way for logging companies to access Liberia's forests without providing real benefits to the communities or contributing to Liberia's tax revenues. Below we outline various practical steps that could be taken to ensure that the right decisions are made by the right people and that communities have the support they need in order to sustainably manage their forests. They are presented here for consideration, adaptation and adoption by communities, national and international NGOs, the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) and other government agencies, international donors and the private sector.

KNOWING THE TRUE VALUE OF LIBERIA'S FORESTS

One reason the large-scale, export orientated model of forest concessions remains so persistent is the commodification of timber to the exclusion of everything else. There are currently no studies that quantify informal and intangible values of Liberian forests or place a figure on how much forests are worth to Liberia as a whole. However the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) in collaboration with US based NGO Namati, and Ghanaian

researchers Sync Consult have all made recent studies on this topic.

- In 2015 USAID and US Forest Service researchers completed a gap analysis of targeted domestic natural resource markets in Liberia, which noted that “there are robust national and subnational markets for timber, charcoal, bushmeat and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs). These domestic markets impact the forests and biodiversity and contribute to the economy in ways that are poorly understood”. The study concluded that there is “an overarching need for a comprehensive nation-wide production and consumption survey ... to better understand the market, identify trends, identify any species and habitat types at risk by resource demand, and to be able to make recommendations for improved and well-informed governance”.¹⁰ Such a survey, whether by individual commodity or done more holistically, needs to be participatory in order to strengthen communities' own understanding of the value chains involved, as well as focused towards future CBFM in Liberia.
- The Sustainable Development Institute in collaboration with Namati has piloted community-based research methods in Liberia to determine what people gain from all the goods and uses they obtain from their forests and lands. They have developed a useful Community Land Valuation tool “designed to quickly and elegantly educate community members on the value of the land to them”¹¹ that provides communities



Harvests from Zortapa family farm, Nimba, Liberia; © Louise Riley

and decision makers with much better information on what the actual value of land is and what it provides to communities. This allows comparisons to be made with what investors may be offering in return for land leased, which is often well below market value.¹² Preliminary results found that an average household in rural Liberia obtain goods worth approximately US\$200 per month from their lands from just the 6-12 products that were surveyed.¹³ This study could be replicated across Liberia in order to build up a clearer picture of the monetary value that people's land provides, and would be a useful starting point for any interactions between communities and potential investors.

- The Ghana-based research organisation Sync Consult conducted an in depth study in 2015 to “ascertain the value and uses of land and forests to the communities in Sinoe County and how the establishment of the Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) palm oil plantation is affecting livelihoods of the people in the communities, positively and negatively”.¹⁶ This mirrors the findings of the SDI/ Namati community land valuation tool, underscoring that the true value of lands and forests are much higher when multiple uses and values are captured.¹⁷

Forests and GDP in Ghana¹⁴ & Uganda¹⁵

- Ghana: the informal forest cash economy contributes US\$245 million per year; there is no reliable data on the non-cash economy.
- Uganda: the total annual economic value of all marketable and non-marketable forest values, in 2004, was about US\$340 million.
- There is “no visibility of the real contribution of forestry”. If this economic activity was reflected in national accounting, it would make a significant addition to GDP.

These initiatives seek to calculate a value for the informal economy from farming, a handful of NTFPs and fuelwood, although as with many economic assessments they have not been able to estimate the intangible values such as spirituality or cultural traditions. Nevertheless they show that when informal and intangible goods and services are included, the value of the land is shown to dramatically increase. Thus, before an informed decision about how forests and land should be used can be made, communities – and Liberia as a whole – must have more detailed information on the value that NTFPs, ecosystem services, and other intangible goods and services have for both the formal and informal economies.

SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES: TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND GOVERNANCE

Experience from around the world has shown that moving to community-managed forests and towards successful forest-based community businesses is a long and complex process. From the right policy frameworks being developed by the Government of Liberia, to tailored donor programming, a concerted shift by Liberia's NGOs and community based organisations towards community forestry focused activities as well as the involvement of business and entrepreneurs, all sectors have a part to play in this transformation.

Coordination will undoubtedly be required. This could be done through the existing Community Forestry Working Group (CFWG), but eventually it may be necessary to set up a centralised body that can coordinate community forestry initiatives in Liberia, link communities with technical and other assistance, coordinate funds, facilitate meetings and provide a base for information sharing and knowledge transfer. This body could perhaps also be the home of the Community Forest Central Registry, outlined in current draft Community Rights Law regulations.¹⁸

Experience from other countries also suggests that enabling communities to manage their forests and run sustainable forest businesses has required that communities have access to external technical support such as legal expertise, forest management planning, mapping and resource assessment advice amongst others. Access to these technicians is of fundamental importance in setting communities on the path towards sustainable forest management, but will of course require funding and coordination to ensure that communities have access to the right people for their particular needs.



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Liberian NGOs also have an important role to play. Many NGOs in Liberia are excellent advocates and have worked tirelessly to get community rights included in forest and land policies, laws and regulations, thereby laying

the foundations for CBFM in Liberia. They also have a wealth of experience in assisting communities to develop governance and management structures, for example with the Community Forestry Development Committees, and on education programmes on their rights and on applicable laws. Getting the correct governance structures in place for CFMAs to make sure that all bodies are fully elected by and accountable to the community will be key in ensuring that benefits are distributed equitably and that any conflicts can be resolved fairly. Below we propose some practical steps in support of these ideas in more detail.

GOVERNANCE

Grants for NGOs to provide governance support to communities

Communities will require support to establish effective governance structures in order to ensure fair representation, participatory decision making and the sound management of resources and forest based enterprises. Offering grants through a competitive process would encourage NGOs to innovate and to increase their own knowledge and experience, in order to be in a strong position to win funds. If each Community Forestry Organising Committee were to be paired with an NGO who could provide support to them in terms of governance and assistance with the nine step process, this would incentivise NGOs to spread themselves across CFMAs throughout Liberia, thereby building community capacity. The scope should also extend beyond the approval of the CFMA and continue into ongoing governance support.

The focus should be on giving grants to NGOs who can pilot the work on a small scale first and make necessary adjustments, before the scheme gets rolled out on a larger scale. There should be a focus on developing best practice and methodology for how NGOs can best support communities. These NGOs can help to train new NGOs in the second round of funding.

Assistance during the nine step process

Communities that wish to have their rights to forest lands formally recognised need assistance in navigating the nine steps of the CFMA allocation process. Because of the complexity and expense of this process, logging companies have tried in the past to use this to their advantage by offering to take care of this in exchange for being given the right to exploit the forest commercially once the process is complete. It is therefore extremely important that communities have access to independent support during the nine step process to ensure that they are not co-opted by unscrupulous logging companies. NGOs could provide support to the Community Forestry Organising Committees that are leading on the CFMA application prior to its formal approval from as early as step two in the nine step

process. It's from this stage that it must be verified that the application is based on the legitimate and inclusive consent of the community and not coming only from a small group of people with their own vested interests, or backed entirely by a logging company. Funding would allow the NGO to facilitate a rigorous democratic process to ensure governance structures are set up appropriately and able to fully represent the community.

Community Assemblies

Liberian NGOs are also well-placed to work with Community Assemblies to strengthen their cohesion and capacity, as well as to ensure that all members of a Community Assembly are legitimate members of the community who will represent the community properly. It is also important that NGOs give assistance and training to Community Forestry Management Bodies (CFMBs) to report back to Community Assemblies correctly. Every single member of a Community Assembly must have given their consent to an agreement with a logging company. There needs to be a meeting with the whole Community Assembly, and all community members need to sign the document. If it is later found out that this was not the case and a fraudulent application that did not involve the relevant community bodies was submitted, then charges should be brought.

Forest Incomes for Environmental Sustainability¹⁹

USAID plans to continue its support to CBFM in Liberia through FIFES, a US\$23 million, five year programme to *“develop key rural forest-based businesses which provide inclusive, sustainable economic opportunities for smallholders and communities that combat drivers of deforestation and biodiversity loss”*.

FIFES will support some aspects of community-level forest management skill development. The project objectives are to:

1. Strengthen selected forest value chains - wild honey, charcoal, indigenous tree species, cocoa and bushmeat are possibilities.
2. Establish legal and management frameworks for forest businesses.
3. Enhance knowledge and skills for forest businesses and landscape management.

CFMA hotline

Establishing a community forestry hotline could be a quick and easy step to take whilst preparations are under way for other more long-term initiatives to be put in place. This would be a phone number any community member could call to obtain more information about a CFMA application in their area, and could help make the CFMA application process more transparent and to strengthen accountability within the community. It would be appropriate to do this from step two of the nine step process, by printing the number on the posters and promoting it on community radio. At its simplest, the hotline could provide names

and phone numbers of the individuals who submitted the CFMA application. It could also collect information on how widespread and genuine the backing for the CFMA is within the community by asking the caller questions. The phone number of the caller could be saved for the dissemination of information in future.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Community members need the skills to manage their forests collectively and to capture the value from a wide range of goods and services. Francisco Chapela, an expert with 50 years' experience of community forestry in Mexico observes that giving local communities as much control and engagement as possible in logging, processing and silviculture is the best way to have genuine sustainable forestry, and that relying on sub-contracting means that the community is dependent on providers that may have different interests.²⁰



In Mexico it took a generation of young community members to learn CBFM skills before they could assume senior positions in the community business without outside technical assistance.

Of course this may not happen quickly. In Mexico it took a generation of young community members to learn these skills before they could assume senior positions in the community business without outside technical assistance. All the same, the aim must be for skills transfer to take place and to integrate local knowledge and understanding with new ideas about silviculture, NTFP productivity, and ecosystems services.

Database of technical advisors

Communities will require access to many types of professional help as they move through the nine step process, formalise the rights to their lands and pursue sustainable business opportunities. Development of a database of accountants, lawyers, foresters, mapping and resource specialists and business advisors that have been vetted by the CFWG would enable communities to easily access such expertise depending on their current needs. A grant system could be provided in tandem with the database, allowing communities to be quickly assessed and granted funding to hire these experts if successful. The information contained on the database should also be distributed in hard copy to communities, perhaps via the CFWG. This database could potentially become a section within the Directory of Liberian Sustainable Community Forestry outlined on Page 10 at a later stage, once CBFM in Liberia has built momentum.



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Prosper in Liberia

The USAID-funded People, rules, & organisations supporting protection of ecosystem resources (Prosper) project has provided an important foundation for CBFM. It has provided technical assistance in support of 13 initial community forests and led the way in developing procedures for the proper establishment of them.

For this experience and knowledge to be of value to potentially ten times this number of CFMAs, a wide range of local organisations – government and non-government – must be equipped with the skills and resources to expand this support as fast as possible

USAID can play a role in this, but other development programmes in Liberia should also consider how they can make this happen, for example by offering grants for services to be delivered by NGOs and others to communities.

Drafting Forest Management Plans and other legal documents

Expert assistance will be needed to draft the technical documents needed for communities to take control and manage their forests, with sustainable management and conservation of forest resources as the overall goal. In Guatemala, communities hired a two-person team of a forester and a lawyer to draft the required technical documents. The lawyer was able to translate the forester's recommendations into regulations, contracts and Forest Management Plans (FMPs) to govern the management of the forests.²¹ In Liberia, these FMPs would then be approved by the Community Assembly.

FMP templates from other countries further along the CBFM path could also be adapted to suit a Liberian context and further adjusted by the forester and lawyer to suit the needs of each specific community.²² Once developed, long-term strategic FMPs should be revised every five years and accompanied by annual operations plans that outline the exact harvest for a given year. FMPs should contain detailed maps, information on soils, rainfall, vegetation and human settlements, NTFPs, inventory data, harvesting and conservation areas in order to be a useful management tool for communities and any contractors that they may hire. This is also outlined in the Guidelines for Forest Management Planning in Liberia.²³

Resource assessment and mapping

Mapping experts can be enlisted to assist communities in the participatory mapping of their lands and resources. Detailed maps of lands and resources can then be produced to include forest types, roads, areas to be protected, topography, boundaries, areas of high biodiversity, satellite imagery and areas of cultural or spiritual significance. Detailed maps and resource assessments are crucial in laying the foundations for successful forest management, ensuring that the full spectrum of forest uses can be utilised and that a community-wide perspective on the values of the forest can be integrated into its FMP.



Detailed maps and resource assessments are crucial in laying the foundations for successful forest management, [and] ensuring that a community-wide perspective on the values of the forest can be integrated into forest management plans.

It will also be invaluable when forecasting how much income can be realistically generated whilst sustainably managing the resource, so it's important that communities have the wherewithal to hire professional mapping and resource experts who are able to carry out this work to a high standard. It's also important that communities have access to neutral providers of these services, to make sure that they are not forced to rely on the resources of a commercial logging company to complete these assessments. It would therefore be useful for there to be a system of grant provision in order for communities to access these services, as well as including approved mapping and resource assessment providers in the database described on Page 8, allowing communities to easily access neutral and professional experts.

University curricula

Linking the education system of Liberia with the drive towards community forestry is also crucial. Universities that have forestry and agriculture departments such as the University of Liberia and Cuttington University can build on their expertise by developing additional curricula on CBFM, sustainable forest management and sustainable forest business management. This would enable the necessary skills and technical expertise needed for CBFM to be developed in Liberia. The FDA and NGOs could also benefit from these courses, and in addition shorter courses for professionals and practitioners could be developed. It would also be good to include community forestry elements in the curricula on accounting, business management and law. Guest lectures at Liberian universities would also be a great opportunity for CBFM experts from within Liberia and further afield to impart their knowledge and expertise to a wider audience.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FOREST BUSINESSES

SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

It is often helpful if the primary intention of CBFM is seen to be the development of sustainable businesses controlled by local communities, rather than just the transfer of forest management responsibilities without enough attention to how that management will result in material benefit to the communities.

In a synthesis of experiences with locally controlled forestry in eight countries the International Institute for Environment and Development recommended that there needs to be investment in practical programmes that strengthen locally controlled forest businesses.²⁴ Communities need training and support to develop business plans that, when implemented, will allow communities to cultivate sustainable and profitable businesses. Ensuring that communities are able to build self-sustaining businesses will increase the likelihood of the CBFM model being able to meet the needs of communities, and therefore of being successful in the long-term. The study found that efforts must be made early on in the process to assist communities to identify business opportunities and lay out a plan on how to sustainably manage the resources that the community forest provides. Communities also need access to training and support from professionals such as accountants, marketing and business managers who can advise communities on how to best generate livelihoods from their forest resources and on ongoing business management needs as the businesses grow and develop.

The history of successful community forestry businesses elsewhere also points to the importance of strength in numbers and the gradual emergence, not only of local producer organisations and cooperatives, but also of regional associations and ultimately national federations that can represent such groups to political decision-makers.²⁵



Strong community self-governance structures, as well as viable enterprises that can add value to forest resources are essential for the success of community forest businesses.

Strong community self-governance structures are essential for the success of community forest businesses and the development of internal regulations on how to approve, monitor and manage community forestry enterprises for

NTFPs, timber and other forest services. In addition it's vital that viable enterprises that can add value to these resources are developed, including through recruiting qualified business managers to run the community enterprises as functional businesses. Enterprises should include adding value to products and processing. This will create a significant number of jobs, reduce waste, develop products for lesser known species and lead to innovation in utilising the resources the forest has to offer.

The presentations at the Rethinking Liberia's forests conference by the Forest and Farm Facility and the Alliance for Rural Democracy each highlighted the diversity of the small-medium forest businesses that exist in Liberia.^{26,27} From beekeeping to forest fruits and spices to building materials and fuelwood, each of these generate incomes and create significant employment in Liberia. People dependent on the natural forest have a positive incentive to conserve the resource to ensure the future viability of their business. Below we outline various ideas on how networks of sustainable and financially profitable businesses based on forest products could be established.

DIRECTORY OF LIBERIAN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY FORESTRY

A directory of Liberian forest-based businesses would be an invaluable way of linking individual small-scale producers to markets, and would provide a platform for sharing skills, knowledge and experiences between those involved. It would be an important resource for community associations looking to learn about different options to generate incomes from their community forests. Online directories such as <http://liberia.buildingmarkets.org/> and <http://www.businesslib.com/portal/businessdirectory/> are ready-made platforms that could provide a basis for a sustainable forest business directory.²⁸ An Internet-based system enables users themselves to keep their information up-to-date, and has the potential to reach international markets. It would also be important that the directory is available in hard copy if it is to reach all forest-dependent communities. People can then get in touch with those businesses that they could benefit from interacting with, and could look for opportunities to arrange visits and meetings if appropriate.

TRADE FAIR OF SMALL-MEDIUM FOREST BUSINESSES IN LIBERIA

Serving a similar function to the directory, a trade fair would bring small-medium forest based entrepreneurs and communities from across Liberia together, allowing connections to be made and ideas to cross-pollinate. Practical workshops could be held at the trade fair to give in-depth information on different business models, overcoming challenges or detailed focus groups on particular NTFPs. An event such as this could take place



Community members tend to a beehive, Quintana Roo, Mexico; © Julia Christian

on an annual basis to allow relationships and momentum to be built. Over time this trade fair could be broadened out to include other countries within West and Central Africa.

CO-OPERATIVES

There is a critical need for community forest entrepreneurs to build associations and co-operatives in order to achieve scale and improve market negotiating power. Co-operatives underpin successful production around the world, and it is estimated that 37 percent of Brazil's agricultural GDP is produced through cooperatives.²⁹ Co-operatives facilitate greater access to inputs and allow for access to wider markets, as well as providing a network for information sharing and communication. Facilitation of group business development at local level combines the scale of multiple individual community production activities and allows for much greater negotiating power in the market place. Many agricultural co-operatives already exist in Liberia, but the formation of specific community forest co-operatives would be a good first step for any forest-based producers to take in order to gain strength in numbers, access to markets and to make enterprises more profitable.

Community Forest enterprise in Petén, Guatemala

Petén in Guatemala is one of the best examples where communities have over time developed the skills to sustainably manage their forests and generate good incomes from value-added timber products and NTFPs. In 1995, the Association of Community Forests of Petén (ACOFOP) was established to promote community livelihoods and economic development through sustainable forest management. Currently, this association comprises 22 community organisations, some 2,500 people who, between them, manage around a half a million hectares of forest. Communities belonging to ACOFOP undertake a diversified range of activities, including harvesting of high-value timber, secondary timber and non-timber species such as xate (*Chamaedorea* species, used in the floral industry), chicle gum (from the Sapodilla (*Manilkara zapota*) tree) and Pimenta (allspice) species, as well as craft activities and tourism. ACOFOP also created the FORESCOM company to process and market communities' harvested products. They have obtained Forest Stewardship Council certification for 482,000 hectares of community-managed forests. ACOFOP and the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP) are now negotiating a Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) project called GuateCarbon. The initiative aims to sequester 800,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide, and thereby generate an annual income of US\$ 1-1.5 million from the carbon market.³⁰

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Co-operatives underpin successful production around the world by facilitating greater access to inputs, allowing for access to wider markets, and providing a network for information sharing and communication.

REGIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Once co-operatives and producer associations have been firmly established, it will be important for regional associations to be formed, most likely with the assistance of donor support. Regional associations are able to enhance marketing and value added possibilities, develop locally controlled businesses and provide financial services to members. Regional associations of such local groups can often play a pivotal role in assembling the capital necessary for investments in value added processing. Such associations can also begin to develop technical, business and financial services for their members, for example training people in forest management and basic business management and financial accounting, and the development of revolving loan funds that can provide collateral for any conventional loans or equity investments. Moreover they can take direct advantage of project funding that would often be impossible to access for individual businesses. Successful regional associations can also develop internal processes to avoid elite capture and ensure that they continue to serve the needs of all their members and the best interests of the producers.

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Regional associations are able to enhance marketing and value added possibilities, develop locally controlled businesses and provide financial services to members, and can play a pivotal role in assembling the capital necessary for investments in value added processing.

In Petén, Guatemala, an association was formed to promote community livelihoods and economic development through sustainable forest management. This was made up of 22 community organisations who between them manage some 500,000 hectares of forests. These community organisations are engaged in a range of activities from production of high-value timber, secondary timber, NTFPs, craft activities and tourism.

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Ultimately the vision would be to establish a national federation of community forestry, once the financial resources of the membership base had evolved to be able to support an advocacy function at the national level. Liberia's National Union of Community Forestry



Community-owned furniture factory, Peten, Guatemala; © Julia Christian

Nepal's CBFM Federation: FECOFUN³¹

- The FECOFUN currently has 13,500 member communities representing 8.5 million forest users.
- Its thematic areas include: advocacy, lobbying and legal support; sustainable forest management; and promotion of NTFPs, small scale business and livelihoods improvements.
- It has a national office as well as 30 district offices.
- In addition to support from donors its core income is from membership charges.

Management Bodies could potentially become such a federation once (NUCFMB) in Liberia has become more established. A national federation would be able to push for better policies across the range of work necessary for forestry-related business development and trade, and it would be important build synergies with the work of the Forest and Farm Facility and the Farmers Union Network in Liberia.³²



A national federation would be able to push for better policies across the range of work necessary for forestry-related business development and trade.

This sort of work requires a collective vision among communities, NGOs and government support agencies to create the conditions for globally competitive, but still

locally controlled forest businesses, as can be seen in Sweden and Guatemala for example.³³

COMMUNITY BASED FOREST BUSINESS RESOURCE CENTRE

There have been discussions amongst some of the leading community members involved in establishing the NUCFMB in Liberia for a resource centre where communities can share ideas and access information on community based forest business. A resource centre could bring NGOs and communities involved in such businesses together and become the hub of a forest business directory discussed on page 10. In time such a resource centre could grow to become the focal point for community based forest business expertise, as is the case for the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN).

LEARNING FROM OUTSIDE EXPERIENCE

Innovation, networking, skills and knowledge from within Liberia will benefit from ongoing exchanges with those in other countries who are further along the path of community forestry. This could be implemented in both directions – Liberians taking study-tours to countries with a functional community forestry model, as well as experts from outside visiting Liberia. Exchanges would allow Liberian practitioners to learn from the experiences of other countries that have a longer history of community forestry and to interact with leaders in the field, forging relationships that can be utilised for advice and guidance, and establishing ongoing dialogue and learning between different countries. The emergence of a new African network for developing locally controlled forest businesses across Africa, the Africa Forest Enterprises Connect Network could be engaged to help develop this potential.³⁴ The benefits of different types of exchange are outlined below.



Bleih Community Forest, Nimba, Liberia; © Louise Riley

Study Tours

A study tour would involve small, strategically selected individuals or groups of NGO, community and government representatives visiting countries where community forestry is more established, for example Tanzania. This would be a great opportunity to experience how community forestry works in practice, observe how the management structures function, see facilities and community businesses in action and consider how these could translate into the Liberian context. Having first-hand experience of the innovative ways of generating sustainable incomes from forests could inspire people to take similar actions within Liberia, and offer a better understanding of some of the challenges that CBFM poses and how these could be dealt with effectively.³⁵

Expert Visits

Expert visits could also be useful in addition to study tours or as a lower-cost alternative, where leaders in the field of CBFM from other countries visit Liberia and hold a series of seminars and workshops. To make best use of time the seminars could be with separate stakeholder groups – communities, NGOs, small, medium and larger private sector actors, the FDA and other government agencies – to respond to their different needs and perceptions, and the visit might also conclude with a multi-stakeholder dialogue. These experts could also hold sessions at universities in Liberia to strengthen new curricula developed on community forestry and sustainable forest business. Possible countries that these experts could be drawn from include Cameroon, Tanzania, Mexico, Guatemala, and Nepal, where CBFM is more established.

CONCLUSIONS

The practical suggestions identified in this paper are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but are best seen as a snapshot of current possibilities, to stimulate discussion and ideas. The suggestions are offered for consideration for project designers, implementers, donors and communities.

Interest in making CBFM a success in Liberia is coming from many different angles. Some are interested in promoting small business development whilst others prioritise land tenure and community rights; some are concerned with protecting forests to mitigate climate change or to conserve biodiversity whilst others again focus on good governance and strengthening the policy and institutional frameworks. It is recognised by many that the transition towards CBFM in Liberia will require significant adaptation on the part of the FDA, developing structures and systems that enable forest management to be decentralised, as well as fostering an attitude of working with communities as active partners by providing advice on forest management and best practice. Based on experience in many other countries, the path to CBFM takes longer than a generation to become established and has numerous challenges along the way. Yet where it has been successful it has provided communities with income security, sustained forests, promoted local economies and facilitated rural development, as well as generating higher taxes for governments than under industrial timber production.

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Lloyds Chambers
1 Portsoken St
London E1 8BT
United Kingdom

mail@globalwitness.org
www.globalwitness.org

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