

ABSTRACT

TITLE: A Collaborative Approach to Forest Resources Management in Post-War Liberia

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Forests in Liberia and Sub-Saharan Africa have suffered gross destruction and mismanagement due to unsustainable approaches in which forest resources were managed, especially during times of political conflicts. This destruction is caused by many factors, which begin with rural communities living in or near the forests, the state's failure to enforce rules and regulations governing the forests, and logging operations by foreign companies and foreign encroachment by neighboring countries. In recognition of the problem, several studies reveal that many Sub-Saharan countries, not including Liberia, began to revise their forestry policies in order to promote co-management of forests and other natural resources as early as the 1980s. It is also revealed that for many rural forest communities in the tropics, forestlands management has been and is still part and parcel of their livelihoods. These communities also consider the use of forest resources for present and future generations. In the case of Liberia, collaborative management in the forest sector is crucial as the country seeks to promote sustainable forest management initiatives in keeping with international treaties and protocols on forests and environmental health. Past research also showed that mismanagement of forests and other natural resources, tribal conflict as a result of unequal distribution of forests and other natural resources, and marginalization of rural people were a few of the many issues that plague and are still plaguing Liberia and other Sub-Saharan African countries. In the case of Liberia, mismanagement of forests and its related resources, particularly during the civil war, contribute to the present economic hardships, land tenure problems, and distrust between the national government and forest communities.

The real situation for Liberia is that new policies on decentralizing forest management began in 2006. In 2009, the “Regulation to the Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands¹” was drafted into law. These laws and/or regulations are being implemented throughout the region, but until now, the government’s inability to evaluate their effectiveness for sustainable forest management exists, not to mention the Forestry Development Authority’s (FDA) shortage of trained personnel to monitor or enforce these laws and regulations. This research project is designed to overcome this problem through the use of a collaborative management approach to forest resource management, based on the views of affected forest communities in Grand Gedeh County. This approach supports the direct involvement of local people in the development and management of their forest resources and promoting local governance. This research was limited to two interview segments involving in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=34) and Key Informant (KI) interviews (n=6). KIs were government and local officials of the county. KIs helped the researcher to identify the affected forest communities and their views were used to validate semi-structured interviews. Participation was based on the following criteria: age 18 and above, residence status of the study area, proof of leadership of at least one year and above, familiarity of the research topic. Data collected were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed confidentially using codes and themes. Based on the reviews and interviews, a content analysis was used to organize participants’ views as it relates to collaborative forest management policy. Other secondary data were collected from partners or NGOs.² This analysis led to the recommendation of a new approach of forest management in Post-War Liberia that is free of corruption and fair to all parties involved, including rural communities, and one that is easy to enforce with little or no financial cost to the government of Liberia.

¹ The purpose of this regulation is to establish rules, guidelines and procedures for the establishment, management, and use of community forests in Liberia (FDA, 2011).

² Non-governmental organizations, programs, and civil society organizations working in partnership with the government of Liberia to ensure the implementation of community forestry, ecosystem management as well as environmental management.