



TECHNICAL BRIEF – Community forestry in Liberia: progress, challenges, and recommendations

Introduction

This background paper draws on experiences and lessons learnt in community forestry linked to the implementation of the Community Rights Law, the National Forestry Reform Law, and the Land Rights Act and their enabling regulations. It seeks to assess the performance of community forestry since the enactment of the Community Rights Law of 2009, identify implementation gaps, and propose policy and institutional options for reform. It further seeks to provide a review of the legal framework, challenges in achieving the intent and spirit of the laws and presents options to guide the discussions on effective and sustainable forest management that benefits affected communities.

Liberia has developed a progressive legal, regulatory and policy framework that recognizes and legitimizes the role of communities in governing the nation's natural resources including the forest sector. Article 7 of the 1984 Constitution commits to managing natural resources in a way that maximizes the participation of all Liberians, and "advance[s] the general welfare of the Liberian people." The 2006 National Forestry Reform Law (NFRL) and its enabling regulations recognize communities' role in forest management as well as benefit sharing from forest resources. Similarly, the Community Rights Law (CRL) of 2009 with respect to Forestland recognizes communities' ownership rights over their forest resources and grants communities certain forest management responsibilities. Furthermore, the Land Rights Act (LRA) of 2018 recognizes the rights of communities over their customary land and those rights are equal in law to private land rights, explicitly recognizing and protecting their full bundle of rights including the right to access, own, transfer and exclude others from using their Customary land. These laws, combined, seek to do three things: Recognition of the rights of communities over forestland and customary land, exercise those rights over their forest and

customary lands and for communities to benefit from the resources that are generated from these natural resources.

Background

Liberia has approximately 6.6 million ha of lowland tropical forests that form part of the remaining Upper Guinea forests of West Africa.¹ “Of the 6.6 million hectares of forest, approximately 40% falls under commercial concessions, 30% under community claims, and the remainder under protected areas.” However, these forests have declined substantially in recent decades, shrinking by 0.7 percent on average each year between 2,000 and 2015.² The forestlands are extremely rich in biodiversity and are a source of livelihood for forest inhabitant communities and are a major source of revenue generation and over the years, it has contributed to the national budgets of successive governments.

At the peak of the country’s civil unrest, Liberia’s forests were used to finance war efforts. The timber industry was responsible for widespread abuses of forest inhabitants and destructive logging and income used to fuel the conflict. Because of this abuse of the forest, the United Nations Security Council, in 2003 imposed sanctions that banned imports of Liberian timber until Liberia reformed its forest sector management practices to meet internationally accepted standards of transparency and accountability.

With the end of the civil conflict in 2005, the Government of Liberia (GOL), in partnership with international development partners and Liberian civil society organizations embarked on a major effort to reform the forest sector. Some of the reform efforts included the cancellation of all timber concession contracts issued prior to 2003, and the enactment of several legal instruments and their implementing regulations. These reforms were intended to provide a new institutional and legal framework to increase the participation of citizens in forest governance, to manage the forestlands in a sustainable manner and for forest communities to benefit from their forest resources in an inclusive and equitable manner.

Legal framework

Liberia has developed the necessary legal and regulatory framework to guide the management of the country’s natural resources, particularly forest and land and they are as follows:

2006 National Forestry Reform Law (NRFL) – This law requires the engagement of communities in forest resource management and requires concessionaires “to establish a social agreement with local forest-dependent communities...that defines communities’ benefits and access rights” (Article 5.3). The law also called for the enactment of a Community Rights Law for forest governance.

¹ <https://www.forestcarbonpartnership.org/country/liberia>

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/04/01/putting-people-first-how-we-support-the-forest-sector-in-liberia>

2009 Community Rights Law with respect to forestland (CRL) – This statute provides a basis for community forestry grounded in three Cs (Community, Conservation and Commercial logging). It further recognizes the ownership rights of communities to their forest resources and allows communities to sign agreements with companies for timber or nontimber extraction, and that authorized community forests are entitled to 55 percent of the money generated from all agreements. However, communities do not own the land where the forest resources are found (Articles 3.1 and 6 which pose certain limitations on the extent to which communities may exercise certain rights). The implementation of this law has been informed by its enabling regulation adopted in 2011 and revised in 2017.

2018 Land Rights Act (LRA) – Counting on the 2010 Land Rights Policy, the GoL enacted into law the Land Rights Act (LRA) of 2018. The law recognizes customary land ownership to be equal in all ways to private land ownership, and that communities are not required to have a deed to be considered owners of their customary land. Unlike the CRL, the LRA recognizes and protects communities' full bundle of rights including the right to access, own, transfer and exclude others from using their Customary land.

Situational analysis (progress and challenges)

The intent of the CRL and LRA is to give communities ownership and management rights of forests and land under customary tenure and that resources generated benefit the communities and improve their livelihood conditions. Despite these progressive legal and regulatory reforms, the evidence from the ground shows that the lives of forest communities have not been changed substantially as a result of the implementation of the laws. There is a sharp contradiction between laws and their implementation in communities. There are major challenges contributing to this contradiction.

Progress

While there are persistent challenges in the implementation of programs in community forestry, there have been some progress in the sector. They include the following:

- Laws and regulations are in place to regulate the sector.
- Tools, guides, and checklist have been developed to facilitate processes to enable communities to gain community forest status.
- Tools have been developed to assess the socio-economic and biodiversity benefits in recognized community forest.
- Communities are aware of their rights to ownership of community forest.
- Governance structures have been established in approved community forests in compliance with relevant provisions of the CRL and CSOs and international development partners have provided capacity building trainings for the structures.
- The National Benefit Sharing Trust Board has been established and it is operational.
- The FDA has granted community forest status to 57 communities covering the period 2011 to present. Of the amount, 9 are conservation communities, and 47 have CUCs while 7 medium commercial used contracts have been signed from 2024-present.

- Commercial Used Contracts (CUCs) template has been developed to help communities manage their logging contractual relationship with logging companies. It is unclear how many of the CFMAs have signed the CUCs.
- Some forest communities have used their shared benefits in an effective and efficient manner that has contributed to socio-economic development. For example, in Sinoe County, the Sewacajua CFMA used logging proceeds to build a primary and junior high school, demonstrating local benefit-sharing in practice. However, weak auditing of revenues has led to mismanagement in other counties such as Gbarpolu and Grand Bassa.
- Arrears from FMC and TSC area-based fees owed to communities were about US\$14.1 million by the end of 2021, or 78% of that owed.³ The current government has made some efforts to settle portion of these arrears but it is unclear what has been paid up to date.

Challenges

Community forestry, despite its potential to empower forest communities to manage their forest sustainably so that the resources that are generated can benefit them, interventions in the sector continue to face the following challenges:

Weak governance

The governance structure of community forestry has three layers: Community Assembly (CA), Executive Committee (EC) and Community Forest Management Body (CFMB). The CFMBs are the operational arm of the governance structure and in many instances, they have overshadowed the other structures in decision-making processes around the management and utilization of forest resources. In other instances, dominant members of the three governing structures have colluded in the mismanagement of resources from commercial logging contracts. For example, last year, US\$265,000.00 was mismanaged by a forest community in Grand Bassa County influenced by members of the governing structure.⁴ There are other instances of mismanagement of communities' resources from other parts of the country.

Weak accountability mechanism

The mismanagement of communities' resources has, to a large extent, taken place with gross impunity. Most communities have not demonstrated the will to hold those involved accountable for their actions. Even though there are remedies at their disposal. The flow of information is obstructed by the narrow and long chain of communication among the CFMB, EC and CA. Meetings to be held by the CAs do not take place regularly and by the time information is communicated to the CA, it is distorted and this is a contributing factor to the lack of accountability.

³ NUCFDC & NBST, 2024, Presentation to EU-GoL JIC; <http://flegtvpafacility.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2024-June-Liberia-11-JIC-Aide-Memoire-18-Annexes.pdf> (Annex 2). US\$6.2 million is owed by GoL to the NBST, from money it has received from the logging companies, plus US\$7.9 million representing 30% of the money companies owe GoL.

⁴ Key Informant Interview conducted on October 20, 2025 with a staff of FDA.

Inadequate oversight and weak enforcement by FDA

The Forestry Development Authority (FDA) has a statutory responsibility to provide oversight of the operations of Authorized Forest Communities (AFCs). Compliance with this responsibility has not been consistent, due largely to a lack of financial and logistics capacity of the FDA to perform this function across 57 ACFs nationwide. This gap has left communities vulnerable to manipulation in negotiating commercial logging contracts as well as the provision of technical assistance to communities in assessing the values of their timbers.

Pre-mature termination of commercial contracts by companies and abandoned logs

Some community forests have experienced the pre-mature termination of commercial contracts by logging companies without paying liabilities to the communities. Companies are supposed to pay to communities based on logs that are exported. In some communities, companies fell logs and they are not financially potent to export them and they are left abandoned. Between 2019 and 2024, at least five major logging companies—including Alpha Logging, International Consultant Capital (ICC), Masayaha Logging, and Sing Africa Plantation—have abandoned thousands of logs across the country. In Sinoe alone, Mandra Forestry is reported to have abandoned nearly 7,000 logs to decay. In Nimba and Rivercess, ICC reportedly abandoned over 3,000 harvested logs.⁵ Forest Trends and the media estimate that more than 17,000 logs have been abandoned nationwide since 2019, representing a potential market value of over US\$20 million.⁶ Communities could have benefitted from this for development purposes. The law is clear on abandoned logs. FDA's Regulation 116-17 states that once logs are harvested but not exported or accounted for, the FDA is required to launch an investigation within 10 working days, impose fines (triple the value of the logs), and seek a court warrant to seize and auction the abandoned logs.

Unsustainable community practices

Resources generated from community forestry are heavily invested in physical infrastructural development project such as the construction of clinics, schools, commercial guest houses and dwelling places for local administrative authorities. Some of the projects do not have in their design clear and well-articulated sustainability plans. This means that most of the projects are short-lived and are not responsive to the long-term needs of the communities. In addition, most communities do not have the capacity to assess the efficiency of the projects to determine value for money.

Weak supervision by NBST

Communities where Forest Management Contracts (FMCs) operate also receive shares of revenue generated. The FDA regulatory framework calls for the establishment of Community Forestry Development Committee (CFDC) in each FMC area. They CFDCs are to ensure accurate community representation and to negotiate social agreements with logging companies and manage projects to be built from communities' share of forest resources. Communities' benefits from the operations of FMCs are received by CFDCs through the

⁵ <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/crime-watch/liberia-unmasking-waste-and-abuse-of-forest-resources-in-liberia-the-case-of-abandoned-logs/>

⁶ Ibid

NBSTB. The NBSTB, however, lacks the institutional and technical capacity to provide adequate oversight supervision of projects identified and implemented by the CFDCs on behalf of communities.

Delayed remittance of communities' benefit by the GOL

There has been consistent delay by the government in the disbursement of communities' share of resources that are generated from the operations of FMCs. This is because the revenues are deposited into the government's consolidated account and most often, they are diverted to other government's priorities. Of late, the Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP) and the National Union of Community Forestry Development Committee (NUCFDC) entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) wherein communities' share of revenue is deposited into a transitory account for onward remittance to the NBSTB. While this is a positive development, the MoU does not have a force of law and it can be circumvented without any legal consequence. See below for a breakdown of payments.⁷

Land Rental Fees Payment Summary Information

No.	Year	Payment Term	Total Paid
Payments made from GOL Consolidated Account			
1.	2009 - 2023	Total areas/30% of total amount collected by GoL	\$10,152,116.74
2.	2015 - 2025	Total arrears pay as of present	\$4,817,091.00
3.	2009 - 2023	Total area still owed by GoL (#2-#1)	\$5,335,025.71
Payment through Transitory Account			
4.	2024 - 2025	Euro-Liberia Logging Company payment made	\$234,495.76
Payments under different Regimes			
5.	2015 - 2017	1 st Unity Party Regime	\$2,622,000
6.	2021 - 2022	CDC Regime	\$1,300,000
7.	2024 - 2025	2 nd Unity Party Regime (including Transitory payment	\$1,129,586.76
Overall total Payment			\$5,051,587
Current Arrears owed by GOL			\$5,335,025.71

The case for rethinking the current approaches to community forestry

Below are some factors that make the case for reimagining the current model to community forestry:

Commercial logging is not yielding desired results

The forestry sector that is predominantly focused on commercial logging is not meeting the expectations of desired revenues for the government and forest communities. Unpaid taxes to the Liberian Government from logging companies exceed \$43 million, almost 50% of what is due. The contribution of logging to the national economy has been around 4-6% per annum, far below the target of 12%.

⁷ Source: NBST Secretariat

Benefit-sharing schemes are having limited impacts on the lives of communities

The Government of Liberia (GoL) owes communities in the amount of \$5,335,025.7.⁸ This amount if disbursed and used efficiently could respond to the needs of communities. This gap is further compounded by the failure of social agreements to respond to the schools, clinics, and other infrastructure needs of affected communities. Social agreements are often non-specific in terms of the party to provide social services and specific timelines for completion thereby making them unenforceable.

Grievances within the sector

Growing intra-communal grievances as a result of the sector that meeting the expectations of community members (financial, environmental security and access to social services).

Deforestation is on the increase

Deforestation is increasing at a rate of over 2% per annum. The rate of degradation from dense forest to sparse has doubled in less than a decade.

Sustainable community forest management is uncertain

The current trend of waste and abuse in the operation of community forestry and the current model that is leaned more to commercial logging wherein felling exceeds regrowth is an indication of unsustainable forest management.

Emerging opportunity for alternative sources of income

Though at an experimenting phase, there are emerging models and opportunities for alternative sources of income and investment in the sector that has the potential to prevent the aggressive felling of trees with less benefits for community members.

Topical issues

In re-imagining the current approaches to community forestry there are other topical issues that need to be considered in ongoing conversations with respect to the landscape:

Natural resources and governing structures

The CRL and the LRA both recognize different governing structures for the management of forest land (CFMBs) and customary land (CLDMCs), respectively and both have a force of law. In the event wherein a community forest is located within a demarcated and formalized customary land, this could spark a potential conflict issue around who governing structure has the authority to make decisions on the management of benefits that are accrued from the forest. The two governing structures are not mutually exclusive of each other and they should complement each other but their relationship should be outlined in clearly defined roles and responsibilities within the framework of the statutes that created them. Within such a

⁸ Source: NBST Secretariat

framework, the management of forest and land resources could cause more harm than good to local communities.

In the event wherein a community is to receive cash payment on behalf of the community for forest land on formalized customary land, a joint fund-holding scheme by the CLDMC and CFMB has the potential to mitigate conflicts or disagreements over the control of such fund. This could also engender a collaborative approach and shared responsibility for the management of funds.

Commercial logging, conservation and carbon trading in the context of formalized Customary Land

Customary land ownership is recognized by law. In the event wherein third any third party expresses an interest in undertaking other activities such as commercial logging, conservation or carbon trading within formalized customary land, the implementation of any such activity must be based on a decision of the Community Acting Collectively (CAC).⁹ This includes arm-lengths negotiation between the community and the third party in protecting the interest of the community in terms of income, environment protection and other benefits.

Community livelihoods in the context of land and forest uses driven by external actors

In the absence of the Community Rights Law and the Land Rights, livelihood interventions were considered benefits and based on good intentions, and good practices of external actors involve in resource extraction or conservation of forests. In the current environment, communities as rightsholders are now entitled to improved and enhanced livelihoods. As such, external actors including I/NGOs and private sector, need to be held at higher standards of accountability when they develop and implement livelihood projects are part of the interventions affecting community forest resources. This may however require developing a system for assessing and evaluating the impacts of livelihood projects developed and implemented in forest communities.

Inter-agency coordination

While it is true that the FDA is the line agency responsible to regulate the forestry sector, there are other activities taking place within the sector such as mining, agricultural concessions and environmental pollution that are regulated by the statutory mandates of other ministries, agencies and commissions. The FDA needs to take up the leadership role in working collaboratively with the Ministries of Mines and Energy (MME), Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Bureau of Concessions (NBC) to develop a complimentary approach in regulating the sector. Collaboration could include information sharing, joint monitoring of compliance standards, coherence in enforcement of laws, regulations, and policies. Other collaborative interventions can include developing standard guidelines to manage competing land uses, a standard template for FPIC and social agreements, and to ensure that marginalized groups in communities such as women, youth,

⁹ According to the LRA, the CAC is the highest decision-making body in customary land governance.

minorities and people living with disabilities are participating meaningfully in decision-making around the management of natural resources.

Emerging opportunities

There are several emerging opportunities for benefit-sharing that communities could leverage. They include:

- Payment for Stewardship
- Income from carbon trading
- Income from biodiversity payments
- Other forms of climate finance
- Land lease payments to Community Land Development Management Committees

Options for consideration

The formulation of the laws on natural resources has not been sequential enough. Practices in communities in the implementation of the laws have not adequately match the spirit and intent of the laws and this has undermined communities' ability to benefit from land and forest resources. Based on the progress made and the challenges highlighted, the following options are proposed for consideration to improve operations within the sector:

Option 1: Review of the legal and regulatory framework

The implementation of the legal framework of the forestry sector over a period of close to 20 years and it is imperative that the laws be reviewed based on documented lessons learnt from FDA, CSOs and the experiences from communities. One particular area for consideration is the governance structure of community forestry within the CRL in light of the documented lessons learnt on weak accountability in the management of resources generated from commercial logging, and the existence of the Land Rights Act which provides stronger rights and better protection for communities. This may involve critically considering whether the CRL is still a viable vehicle for strengthening community ownership and control over their forest or whether the Land Rights Law provide better security of tenure and thus should become the primary vehicle for delivering community forestry. This review should also go hand in hand with a revision of the 2017 amended version of the regulation. This should be undertaken by a multi-stakeholder law review taskforce comprising the FDA, LLA, EPA and CSOs.

Option 2: Revisit social agreements to ensure enforceability for community benefits

Social agreements provide a mechanism for social benefits to communities from mineral, agriculture, and timber concessions with affected communities. This option recommends a process to establish social agreements that are more specifics and timebound in terms of roles and responsibilities of the actors and with sufficient time to prepare communities

representatives who can negotiate social agreements that respond to the needs of their respective communities and allotment of reasonable time to prepare representative body that can negotiate the agreement.

A second option is to adopt a more progressive approach to addressing the issues related to Social Agreements. Critically, Social Agreements were introduced when communities were regarded and treated as occupiers and users of their Customary Land, that situation has drastically changed and communities are owners of their Customary Land with full bundle of rights. This may be an opportune moment to rethink the concept of Social Agreements and include communities as parties to formal contracts between the Government of Liberia and private sector to give communities the standing to pursue legal action against companies whose non-compliance affect the rights of communities. Contractual agreements should include clauses on arbitration and specific enforcement mechanisms.

Option 3: Alternative sources of revenue apart from commercial logging

Climate finance, payment for ecosystem services, ecotourism, and biodiversity finance are emerging opportunities for new revenue streams to communities, but they have not been given adequate consideration and attention. Given the increasing global dialogue on directing forest related climate financing to local communities, stakeholders should give serious attention to these emerging opportunities. At the same time, I/NGOs working in the community forestry sub-sector should take concrete steps to demonstrate the viability of these opportunities by supporting communities and working with the government to attract adequate and sustainable financing linked to community forestry. FDA and communities should consider piloting carbon or biodiversity finance projects in some CFMAs.

Option 4: Establish a natural resource pool fund representing diverse incomes

Land and forest communities receive benefits in fragments and the fragmented funds cannot undertake substantial projects with wider impacts. A natural resource pool fund with income from diverse sources such as mining, agricultural, land and forest can increase the amount available to communities which can enable them to identify bigger investments that can have a catalytic effect on their socio-economic development landscape. This model will require the establishment of a data base and recording system to track the flow of all incomes. It provides a safety net/guard for managing community benefits and tracking implementation. The scheme can have a decentralized component at the county level for easy disbursement to the affected communities. Institutionalizing this model will require a multi-agency policy or regulation with a coordinated approach for implementation. For institutional anchoring, the MFDP should establish a community resource accountability dashboard to enhance transparency.

Recommendations

- That the FDA initiates a legal reform of the existing legal framework on community forestry based on lessons learnt from its implementation including a consideration to increase the size of a community forest from 49,000 hectares to 100,000 hectares linked to clustering communities. This will make commercial logging viable and more attractive to actors interested in the sector.
- That the FDA provides leadership in fostering inter-agency collaboration with a cross-sectoral dimension including MACs such as FDA, MIA, MME, LLA, EPA & MFDP. This can serve as a platform for a National Natural Resource Coordination mechanism to be chaired by the FDA and co-chaired by the MFDP. The collaboration can also be useful in terms of joint inspection and data-sharing.
- That the capacity of forest communities be strengthened to integrate local development planning tools and guidelines that are aligned with the County Development Agendas of their respective counties.
- That the FDA develops a standardized monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for livelihood projects with indicators on income, employment, and sustainability.
- That the FDA and LLA develop a harmonized CFMB-CLDMC guideline and request for annual community forestry governance audit.
- That NUCFMB advocates for the transition of the transitory account into a statutory community forest fund and CFMBs, CFDCs and NBSTB make public their annual financial statements.

Conclusion

Liberia has made significant progress, including developing enabling policies, laws, and implementation regulations that empower communities to exercise ownership and control over forests on their Customary Land. These reforms collectively sought to rebalance state and community ownership, but weak enforcement and institutional overlap have limited the transformative potential of these legal instruments. This has opened the door for communities to pursue forestry that delivers economic, social, and environmental benefits. Unfortunately, while progressive policies and legal frameworks are in place, they have had only limited positive impacts on the overall well-being of local communities.

After two decades of implementing community forestry, this may be an opportune moment for stakeholders to reflect on the progress, challenges, and opportunities related to community forestry, the range of options for improving community forestry outlined in this brief, and draw on their collective experiences to make community forestry work and deliver tangible benefits to communities. To actualize this, there will be a need to undertake legal harmonization of the NFRL, CRL and LRA, stronger measures for financial accountability, investment in diversification of the forest sector beyond logging and institutional strengthening of the FDA and forest governance structures.