



Towards Food Security and Agricultural Self-Reliance: A Policy Study for the Rice Production in Liberia

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ABSTRACT

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Liberia is endowed with enormous opportunities to sustainably and sufficiently feed itself and even export the surplus of the products of vital arable fertile lands it possesses to other countries. Nevertheless, the Country's catastrophic political turmoil that started in 1979 was the result of food insecurity and tempering the staple food of its people due to its unreasonable reliance on the importation of rice. The prime objective of the economy is to fight hunger in which absence the people would be angry then it may lead unwanted consequences. It is recorded that Liberia spends more than 1/3 of its national budget in rice importation every year amounting to US\$250 million. Hence, in order to have a lasting and sustainable solution to food insecurity in the Country, it must consider the following triad: (a) Capacity building for mechanized farming (b) Setting up government-operated rice farms in each county or at least in each of nation's four geographic regions and, (c) Empowering the local farmers and AGREPREENEURS. Let it be assumed that out of 1/3 of the fiscal budget in tone of US\$ 250 million, US\$ 25 million every year dedicated committed and fully implemented in the local rice production by selecting one county in every fiscal year, in fifteen years, the country will have 15 operated and productive mega rice farms and, that will have a positive trickle-down effect on the economy by creating thousands of jobs in addition to reducing unsystematic, unplanned and disorganized urbanization that does more harm than good to our economy. Agriculture should be the **THEME** of Liberia's economy; there is no sustainable way for it to thrive economically and development wide without taking a keen interest in the sector. Therefore, this work aims at looking into causes of food insecurity in Liberia. It also strives to provide some policy recommendations on how to trim and mitigate the problem.

Keywords:

Liberia, rice, food insecurity, Africa, agriculture, economy.

Liberia possesses a conducive climate and fertile soils for the general food and rice production. Yet, it has long suffered from food insecurity due to extreme poverty and endemic inefficiencies in the country's food and agricultural systems. According to the USAID, approximately 18% of Liberian households are identified as moderately to severely food insecure in Liberia's last comprehensive food security assessment in 2018. Even before the Russia-Ukraine conflict

impacted the global commodity prices, food security conditions had worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change impacts and high post-harvest losses. The 2021 Global Hunger Index classifies Liberia's level of hunger as 'serious. Liberia ranked 110 of 116 countries on hunger conditions¹. In addition, inability of the government to institute motivational mechanisms by encouraging local food production and reducing the importation of food that can

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¹ USAID, Food Security, (2022), [Food Security | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](https://www.usaid.gov/our-work/food-security) accessed on 13/Oct/2022

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richly grow in the Liberian soils is also one of the key contributors to food insecurity in the Country.

Having said that, the first step towards sustainable development commences and, has its root in food security and self-reliance in nutritional independence. Do not talk about national security and full political independence as long you are fed by other countries or in lack of food security. ‘We must succeed in producing more – producing more, because it is natural that he who feeds you also imposes his will. We are free, he who does not feed you can demand nothing of you’ says Thomas Sankara, a former President of Burkina Faso and a revolutionary Pan-Africanist-cum- intellectual.² It is expedient to point out that Liberia’s darkest history of political instability that led to brutal Civil Wars (1989-2003) was the result of a food crisis and a threat to the food security in the Country. That is, in 1979, President William R Tolbert’s administration decided to increase the rice price from US\$11 to US\$15, the proposal exacerbated the already explosive political tension between Gabriel Baccus Matthews of the Progressive Alliance of Liberia (PAL) and Dr Togba-Na Tipoteh of the Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA). Hence, a bloody protest and riot took place in Liberia’s Capital, Monrovia, that eventually led to the assassination of President Tolbert in 1980 marked as the dawn of the political instability³. Liberia’ staple food is rice which is sometimes termed as the political commodity by Liberians. The country consumes 750000 25Kg of rice very month⁴. It spends almost one third 1/3 of the national budget in rice importation fiscal year. That is, as according to some reports, it spends at average rate between US\$200-US\$250 million annually on the importation of rice⁵. Though it has vast arable lands with the one of the most enviable agricultural climates in the World. It is not, and cannot be an over-wording to say that agriculture is and must be the **THEME** of Liberia’s economy, if it really desires to sustainably grow, then the sector must be given due credence and priority. In other words, the country enjoys a vast uncultivated arable land, and it has almost 50% of the West African rain forest. Nevertheless, it is lagged behind in food security and yielding anticipated economic shares from the sector⁶

WHY LIBERIA IS NOT NUTRITIONALLY SELF-RELIANT AND FOOD SECURED?

This question is thought-provoking as it stands as self-criticism and self-auditing for Liberia as a nation. Liberia has not been doing well in terms of local food production since its so-called 175 years in existence as an independent and self-governing State. Hence, it is prudent enough and highly anticipated of academics, policy researchers, public decision-makers and concerned local and global partners to dive into discussions about leading factors of Liberia being not nutritionally self-reliant and food-insecure. Of course, it is neither ecological nor geographical and climatic at all as it might be the case in many of those countries that experience food insecurity. Rather, it is about ill- leadership, mismanagement and bad-governance of the State by not doing what is ought to be done to address the problem. The way and manner the agricultural sector has been regarded by the government and the governed is the main reason why food production, mainly the rice, is underrated. The sector is underfunded and locals are not motivated to take agriculture as an awesome venture that can put millions of dollars in their pockets and generate revenues for the government to carry out its development programs for the general good and interest. Above all, the sector has not been considered as a sustainable, reliable and the only lasting dependence and reliance for the food security and nutritional independence. Until then, Liberia will continue to have a long way to go.

Besides, another factor of food insecurity in Liberia is lack of effective and efficient agricultural research and development package (R&D), which supposed to work with other relevant agencies to periodically identify challenges and opportunities in the sector. Also, the low skilled and trained farmers and agriculturists has spontaneously or consciously been heavily influenced by politicking and so-called white -color professionalism. This has led a fewer people enrolling into colleges of agriculture and subsequently taking it as a business not as sustenance and subsistence. Farming has never been seen as a wealth creating ventures and economic activity at both individual and national levels in a number of African economies including Liberia. This has been causing the low performance of the sector on poverty reduction,

² Amber Merrey, Food Insecurity in Africa: Lesson from Sankaran, (2016). The Herald, [Food insecurity in Africa: Lessons from Sankara | The Herald](#) accessed on 11/Oct/2022

³ Globe Afrique Research and Analysis, A Look at the 1979 Rice Riots and Political Unrest in Liberia (2019), [A Look at the 1979 Rice Riots and Political Unrest in Liberia | Globe Afrique - Africa and World News](#) accessed on 11/Oct/2022

⁴ Dr. Togba-Na Tipoteh, How to Solve the Rice Problem Now, (2022). The Daily Observer, [Liberia: How to Solve the Rice Problem Now \(liberianobserver.com\)](#) accessed on 11/Oct/2022.

⁵ FrontPage Africa, Ministry of Finance, Agriculture Ministry Hold Dialogue with Private and International Actors on

Increasing Cocoa, Rice Production (2021), [Liberia: Ministry of Finance, Agriculture Ministry Hold Dialogue with Private and International Actors on Increasing Cocoa, Rice Production – FrontPageAfrica \(frontpageafricaonline.com\)](#) accessed on 11/ Oct/ 2022

⁶ Dr. Mory Sumaworo, The Misery Status of the Agricultural Sector in Liberia despite its Economic Significance, (2020), Globe Afrique Research and Analysis, [The Misery Status of the Agricultural Sector in Liberia despite its Economic Significance | Globe Afrique - Africa and World News](#) accessed on 11/ Oct/2022

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sustained national growth and food-security. However, the practicality of agribusiness and mechanized agriculture are severely needed and paramount to the economic vitalization and industrialization of the agricultural activities. Nevertheless, agribusiness has never been a priority of the Liberian government and Liberians in general notwithstanding the acknowledgement of its economic imperative.⁷

Moreover, it can also be argued that the lack of proper infrastructure between the rural agrarian communities and the urban dwellings and the markets also plays a significant role in scaling down the agricultural sector and demotivating the farmers to grow rice in Liberia⁸. Finally, though we have the capitalist model of the market where the government is not directly involved in trading-; the private sector runs the business while the State regulates-, that does not also mean that the State should keep far away from taking advantage of securing essential goods and services. The safest way to do so is not by absolutely encouraging the importation rather by creating local spaces and avenues for the local growth of rice and, perhaps exporting the surplus. This has never been the case in Liberia. According to some reports, in 1975, a former superintendent the late Harry Greaves stopped imported rice from coming into the Bong County and by extension, Lofa County. That very year marked the beginning of big rice production, the setting up of cooperatives, kuu and other agriculture groups in those two counties. "Once there is a mandate and support, Liberians will grow more rice than they can consume"⁹

LEADING FACTORS OF FOOD INSECURITY IN LIBERIA

There are different key drivers for food insecurity in Liberia, mainly the low domestic rice production to sustainably meet the need of the population. Atop of the list, is highly dependency on importation of staple food (rice). According to some reports, Liberia imports 70% of rice she consumes, making susceptible and defenseless to any eventuality in the global market price shocks¹⁰. Besides, the low agricultural productivity due to reliance on subsistence means of forming and, the lack of support to the local farmers and AGRIPRENEURS. More importantly, the lack of political will to systematically boost local food production is yet another factor of food insecurity in Liberia.

⁷ Dr. Mory Sumaworo, Agribusiness and the African Growth (2019), In The Readers Issue. 1. No. 1. African Institute for Development Research [Microsoft Word - maggazine copy.docx \(filesusr.com\)](#) accessed on 12/ Oct/2022

⁸ Vanguard, Why are Nigerians hungry and food insecure? (2020), Vanguard, [Why are Nigerians hungry and food insecure? \(vanguardngr.com\)](#) accessed on

⁹ FrontPage Africa, Ministry of Finance, Agriculture Ministry Hold Dialogue with Private and International Actors on

THE WAYS FORWARDS SUSTAINABLE FOOD SECURITY IN LIBERIA

Food insecurity and undernutrition remain critical challenges in Liberia. In a broader term, food insecurity leads to malnutrition for both children and adults alike and, it has many adverse consequences on the people survival and their long-term well-being. It also has far-reaching consequences for human capital, economic productivity, and national development overall.¹¹ Therefore, the followings are some of the needed policy recommendations and strategies to curtail the said food problem and scarcity in the Country.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND HUMAN RESOURCE PREPAREDNESS

As the saying goes, we cannot continue doing the same thing in a same method and expect a different result. Liberia cannot continue engaging the agriculture with the same method that has not yielded a result and expects to feed herself. The traditional way of small subsistence farming can only address the micro aspect of the food problem in the Country. In order for Liberia to sustainably address her macro food shortages, scarcity and insecurity, she has to change the mindset by training her citizens in mechanized agricultural skills. This process is not an overnight event; however, it is the lasting, economic and AGRIPRENEURAL way to be fully food secured and self-reliant. The effort of the skilled mechanized farmers and agriculturists can and will produce more rice and other needed crops than back-yard-farmers. To do so, the local colleges and universities, vocational institutions and polytechnics need to be adequately funded and furnished with the needed modern agricultural curricula and sophistication. In addition, international scholarship opportunities to acquire the best experiences from other countries that are mainly into mechanized rice farming.

SETTING UP GOVERNMENT-OPERATED RICE FARMS

The topographic and climatic facts about Liberia indicate that all of its fifteen political sub-divisions (the Counties) are blessed and endowed with fertile lands to grow rice, the staple food. Nevertheless, this great opportunity has yet to be fully taken advantage of due to political and economic negligence from the government since the creation of Liberia as a city state some 175 years ago. Hence, it is prudent as way to mitigate the food crisis and insecurity in the Country by

Increasing Cocoa, Rice Production (2021), [Liberia: Ministry of Finance, Agriculture Ministry Hold Dialogue with Private and International Actors on Increasing Cocoa, Rice Production – FrontPageAfrica \(frontpageafricaonline.com\)](#)

¹⁰ USAID, Food Security, (2022), [Food Security | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](#) accessed on 13/Oct/2022

¹¹ USAID, Liberia : Nutrition Profile (2018), [Liberia: Nutrition Profile \(usaid.gov\)](#) accessed on 13/ Oct/2022

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placing agriculture, especially the production of rice among the top list prioritized priorities of the State. Failure to do so, the fragility of its food security and national stability get more vulnerable; hungry men are angry men as coined by the Jamaican Reggae Star, Bob Marley. Policy-wide, Liberia spends more than US\$200 million in every fiscal year to import rice. Why the government cannot bring about a fiscal policy to reduce that amount by establishing a farm with all the needed modern equipment from seeding (sowing) to irrigating to harvesting and processing stages then marketing, targeting one county in every year for example?! If she is successful in implementing that project in less than 20 years, Liberia will experience a massive rice production that can feed herself and, have a huge reverse for any eventuality such as global food crisis or global epidemic that may affect supply chains across the world as it happened during the Covid-19. This also may even boost the export value of Liberia's economy because the surplus of rice may and can be exported to the neighboring countries.

EMPOWERING LOCAL FARMERS

Another way forward towards to mitigating food insecurity in Liberia and trimming the sporadic shortage of rice, the staple food of the Country is to provide financial, logistic and technical supports to the local farmers. As long Liberia continues to undermine and underrate the local farmers, it will remain susceptible to both artificial and global economy-connected rice shortages in its market. This paper is of the view that rather than committing to paying US\$12 million to the rice importers through a budgetary allotment¹², that money, if adequately used could boost the rice production locally and create job opportunities for Liberians. Unfortunately, the government exports to other countries the opportunity that it supposed to take a keen advantage of to build a lasting and sustainable food security for its people. The people are ready to go to the soil and grow what they eat. However, the government needs to step in and support the process financially and through a radical political will that serve the best interest of the State and its people. According to some reports, in 1975, a former superintendent the late Harry Greaves stopped imported rice from coming into the Bong County (the Central Region of Liberia) and by extension, Lofa County (the Food Basket of Liberia). That very year marked the beginning of big rice production, the setting up of cooperatives, kuu and other agriculture groups in those two counties. "Once there is a mandate and support, Liberians will grow more rice than they can consume"¹³

¹² Africa News Bulletin, Liberia : Government to pay US\$12 million to rice importers, (2022), <https://africanewsbulletin.com/liberia-government-to-pay-us12-million-to-rice-importers/> accessed on 15/Oct/2022.

¹³ FrontPage Africa, Ministry of Finance, Agriculture Ministry Hold Dialogue with Private and International Actors

CONCLUSION

Liberia is topographically and climatically endowed with opportunities to feed herself and even export the surplus of the products of her fertile land to other countries. Yet, her catastrophic political upheaval that started in 1979 was the result of food security and tempering the staple food of her people due to her reliance on the importation of rice. The prime objective of the economy is to fight hunger in each absence the people would be angry then it may lead unwanted consequences. It is recorded that Liberia spends more than 1/3 of its national budget in rice importation every year amounting to US\$250 million. Therefore, in order to have a lasting and sustainable solution to food insecurity in the Country, it must consider the triad: (a) Capacity building for mechanized farming (b) Setting up government-operated rice farms in each county or at least in each of its four geographic regions and, (c) Empowering the local farmers. Let it be assumed that out of 1/3 of the fiscal budget in tone of US\$ 250 million, US\$ 25 million every year dedicated committed and fully implemented in the local rice production by selecting one county in every fiscal year, in fifteen years, the country will have 15 operated and productive mega rice farms and, will have created thousands of jobs in addition to reducing unsystematic, unplanned and disorganized urbanization that does more harm than good to our economy. Finally, it is not, and cannot be an over-wording to say that agriculture is and must be the **THEME** of Liberia's economy, if it really desires to sustainably grow, then the sector must be given due credence and priority

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