

# FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN LIBERIA

JOINT PROGRAMME ON FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION

## CONTEXT

Liberia is characterized by a fragile post-conflict socio-economic environment with a heavy reliance on food imports and high rates of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition.

Despite substantial recovery efforts, the country remains one of the poorest in the world, with a per capita GDP of only US\$135 in 2007 (World Bank). Sixty eight percent of the rural population and 55 percent of the urban population live on less than US\$1 a day, while 56 percent of the rural population and 29 percent of the urban population fall below the extreme poverty line, lacking the necessary means to meet the cost of basic food needs. Food production is slowly but progressively improving in post-conflict Liberia, with abandoned land increasingly being cultivated and implementation of programmes that address production constraints of smallholder farmers. However, despite these interventions, and the country's favourable agro-ecological conditions, agriculture productivity is low: rice imports accounted for 60 percent of the country's total consumption in the year to May 2008.

More recently, the global price hikes, particularly rice, have adversely affected Liberian consumers – especially the urban and non-producing rural population, which make up two-thirds of the country. The results of a joint assessment in June 2008 on the impact of high prices on food security revealed that severe food insecurity had doubled in poor urban neighbourhoods. The general consumer price index increased by 14 percent between January 2007 and 2008, as food costs leapt by 22 percent.

An analysis of demographic and epidemiological data by UN agencies in 2007, revealed that if efforts to address key nutrition problems such as underweight, stunting, and micronutrient deficiencies are not accelerated, 78,100 Liberian women and children will die, 87,000 babies will be born mentally retarded, and a staggering US\$ 431 million will be lost to the economy by the year 2015 due to the impact of poor nutrition on productivity. An estimated 44 percent of childhood deaths are attributed to malnutrition, making it the single most common cause of death of Liberian children.

## KEY FACTS

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|---------------------|--|
| Duration :          | 36 months (01 July 2008 – 30 June 2011)  |
| Total budget :      | US\$ 140 million   |
| Funding available : | US\$ 24 million  |
| Funding required :  | US\$ 116 million   |
| Lead Ministry :     | Ministry of Agriculture  |
| Other Ministries :  | Ministries of Health and Social Welfare, Planning and Economic Affairs, Gender and Development, Education and Public Works |
| UN Agencies :       | FAO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNOPS, WFP, WHO, UNMIL, World Bank  |

## STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

- Mitigating the impact of domestic price increases and ensuring consistent supplies;
- Maintaining access to food and improved nutritional well-being for vulnerable households through safety nets;
- Promoting increases in domestic food production.



A Joint Programme of the Government  
of Liberia and the United Nations



## **JOINT PROGRAMME**

In early 2008, the Government endorsed a national strategy for Food Security and Nutrition, within the wider framework of the Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy that is aimed at :

- i) Enhancing food availability by addressing production**, processing and marketing constraints of small farmers and maintaining predictable and stable food imports.
- ii) Improving access to food**, through enhancing opportunities for employment and increased incomes and improving infrastructure so that Liberians have better physical access to food;
- iii) Promoting better food utilization and improving nutritional status**, through better prevention and more systematic monitoring of malnutrition, as well as supplementary and therapeutic feeding actions aimed at young children and pregnant and lactating mothers.

In response to the global food price crisis, and guided by the framework of the national Food Security and Nutrition Strategy, the Government has quickly responded by: taking fiscal measures to ensure an adequate supply of rice; promoting increases in domestic production by distributing inputs, capacity building and the introduction of new technologies at production and post-harvest levels, with a focus on smallholder producers; and expanding social protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups, such as employment generation schemes, school feeding and nutritional interventions.

In this context, the Government of Liberia (GoL) and the United Nations system (UN) have formulated a Joint Programme on Food Security and Nutrition, the first comprehensive programme in the world that brings together Government and the UN. This Joint Programme provides a coherent response to the problem of food insecurity and malnutrition, avoiding duplication of efforts, and maximizing the impact of all interventions in supporting national objectives.

The Programme adopts a two-pronged approach, offering emergency preparedness and response in an effort to address the short-term crisis in food prices, and medium-term support to the relevant priorities of the Government's Food Security and Nutrition Strategy.

Both short and long-term interventions are designed to ensure a coordinated approach across three main target areas. (see box)

The Joint Programme also provides substantial support for the development of related policies and legislation as well as for strengthening of national leadership and coordination mechanism.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), World Food Programme (WFP), World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank signed the Joint Programme with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs in June 2008.

A Joint Steering Committee co-chaired by the Minister of Agriculture and the UN Resident Coordinator, and comprising representatives from key ministries and participating UN agencies provides strategic direction, monitors progress of the programme and regularly reviews priorities.



### **THE THREE TARGET AREAS**

- Support for access to markets and factors of production, in order to increase local and national food supply
- Access to basic services and strengthening of safety nets, which includes efforts to improve school attendance rates through, for example, the provision of hot meals for 600,000 pre- and primary school children, and promote agriculture-related employment for 40,000 women and youth.
- Nutrition priority interventions including measures such as the training of health and community workers in the promotion of infant and young child feeding and improved nutritional practices.

**The Joint Programme is set to run from 2008 – 2011.**

## IMPLEMENTING MODALITIES

In response to a widespread requirement for harmonized approaches, this Joint Programme offers a coordinated response that boosts the Government's food security, nutrition and poverty reduction efforts. It offers the potential to bring about a real and measurable improvement in the lives of the most vulnerable. The Joint Programme also builds on existing expertise among agencies, enabling a coordinated delivery of services and resources.

It is designed to promote genuine government leadership in food security and nutrition and ensure that all outputs contribute to the attainment of government priorities as indicated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The Joint Programme is based on considerable analytical work, including comprehensive food security and nutrition surveys undertaken in both rural and urban areas. This information, the first of its kind collected for years in Liberia, improves the relevance of the Programme, enabling more targeted support for food security and nutrition efforts.

It also has a particular focus on women, who constitute the majority of small-holder producers and the agricultural labor force in general. It aims to enhance women's access to, and control over, resources and ensure that interventions take account of their special needs.

The Joint Programme also allows for a fast funding mechanism, under which external funding can flow directly to the Programme, via a 'pass-through' mechanism, administered by UNDP. This provides flexibility for outputs and activities to be adapted locally and re-shaped as needs emerge, with unallocated funds being directed accordingly, while keeping objectives and strategy unchanged. The advantage for donors is that funding can be allocated quickly, and efficiently, with overhead costs kept as low as possible and no or minimal duplication of efforts from agencies, and one streamlined reporting mechanism.

## FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

Quick funding will ensure a timely and well structured response to both the short term crisis caused by the recent price hikes as well as enable the Joint Programme to implement mid to long-term solutions that are sustainable. The total estimated costs for the entire Food Security and Nutrition Joint Programme is just over US\$ 140 million.





## CASE STUDY

### School feeding programme boosts attendance

Four year old Nunnoh and 25 year old mother attend the same school in Grand Cape Mount County in rural Liberia. "I'm catching up on schooling I missed due to the war, while my daughter has just started school," explains Bendu Arona, the 25 year old mother.

Nunnoh, her mother, and thousands of others like them, are able to attend school thanks to a Liberian Ministry of Education project supported by the World Food Programme (WFP).

"I have no independent means of income to feed, clothe and send my daughter to school. I would have been forced to drop out of school and look for work if I had no access to the project," says Bendu.

The project is being implemented in 2000 schools across the country, providing daily meals to all students and monthly

take home rations for the older girls. Hundreds of children, mostly girls, either drop out of school to seek jobs and support families. The monthly take-home rations help compensate for any perceived loss of income during the time young girls spend at school and provide an incentive for students to remain in schools.

In the 2007/2008 academic year, WFP has supported the enrolment and retention of around 450,000 school children across all of the 15 counties in Liberia.

The school feeding programme provides healthy meals to students, as well as helps empower girls who would otherwise have had no means to further their education. It supports the Government's effort to achieve universal primary schooling, reduce the gender differential, and the rural-urban gap in primary education.

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