**Important steps in developing co-management plan for East Nimba Nature Reserve: FDA and local communities working together [[1]](#endnote-2)**

On Tuesday April 6th, community members and staff of the Forest Development Authority (FDA) gathered to discuss key elements of a Co-Management Plan for the East Nimba Nature Reserve (ENNR) in Nimba County, Liberia. The three day workshop was facilitated by ARD, contractors for USAID Liberia’s Land Rights and Community Forest Program (LRCFP).

LRCFP works with the Gba and Zor communities to understand their rights and responsibilities regarding forest resources in their customary lands. Community forest management bodies (CFMBs) were established to enable them to undertake forest management activities that can sustain these resources. The communities also formed a Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) to manage Blei Forest, a resource to which, both communities have competing claims. In September 2010, the FDA and JFMC signed an agreement to co-manage the East Nimba Nature Reserve and together they formed a Co-Management Committee (CMC)[[2]](#endnote-3). [[3]](#endnote-4)

Formalities aside, the workshop facilitated by John Waugh of ARD opened with an engaging session on developing common goals and objectives for the Management Plan. There was a strong commonality amongst the group members who saw the reserve as having a role in conservation, scientific knowledge creation, education, livelihood and economic development as well as serving as a model within Liberia and beyond for a co-managed reserve.

While the FDA is tasked by law to develop the Management Plan for the reserve, the CMC is required to provide key inputs for the plan. Over the course of the workshop, four key inputs were considered at length, including the management of; Fire, Wildlife and Hunting, Farming and Non-Timber Forest Products within and surrounding the reserve. In addition, the group developed research tools to collect management data to understand comprehensively the existing management practices and traditional rules governing these practices within the communities’ respective forests and local environment.

While there was broad agreement by participants that the use of fire, hunting and farming within the reserve are not allowed, the issue of NTFP harvesting within the reserve was left open for further discussion.

Discussions within the group and testing of data collection tools within Zortapa, (headquarters for FDA in the reserve) demonstrated lucidly the intimate relationship between the people and their forested environment. The forest is a rich source of seasonal food, animal feed, medicine, building and household materials, cultural and social goods amongst others.

New initiatives from LRCFP and other organizations are showing the commercial value of some NTFPs such as Grains of Paradise, Black Peppar and Graffonia to the communities. While capacity building, establishing nurseries and devising agreed rules on sustainable harvesting techniques is important and ongoing, the challenge remains building a long term enterprise that can bring fair value and economic benefit for the produce to the community. Maintaining access rights for the poor to these resources should also be carefully considered as this activity becomes commercialized.

Communities can appreciate that the protection of biodiversity and conservation is in their long-term interests but from their perspective they need to see an equitable trade-off in terms of job opportunities, enterprise development, social service delivery and alternative livelihood options to sustain their families in the short to medium term. Most families are subsisting day to day and awareness raising while necessary is insufficient to change certain practices that may be considered damaging to the environment.

Communities too have long experience of development initiatives not fulfilling their potential and there is a need to build trust between Government bodies, development partners both national and international and the communities with whom they partner. Through education and outreach, communities are learning the importance of conservation though their key concern is sustaining their livelihoods within the confines of a growing population, decreasing access to agriculture land and reduced fallow periods and decline in animal stocks for hunting.

The FDA is entering new terrain whereby the adoption of co-management principles and values can help community see the reserve as a valuable natural asset and livelihood support as opposed to an outside imposition. The realization that by ceding some powers the FDA can gain strength as an institution to effectively manage the reserve could be transformative for their approach to working with and for communities and Liberia as a whole.

Communities too are learning that rights bring responsibilities. For example, where rules around NTFP collection are agreed to ensure the continued availability of that produce into the future, these rules need to be monitored and enforced. The question remains whether traditional governance structures, social norms and systems can enforce these regulations given the competing interests and needs within and between communities.

The FDA and community members are taking strong strides in a process that can transform key aspects of forestry governance in Liberia. The completion of the management plan in the coming months and its effective implementation offers hope that the management of natural resources in Liberia can benefit local communities, the country as a whole and the wider world. International donors, development partners and local civil society have important roles to support and sustain this key initiative in the years ahead.

1. Personal reflections of Liam Gilmore, STEWARD Representative in Liberia. These viewpoints do not necessarily reflect the opinions or positions of USAID, STEWARD or ARD [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Sourced from internal ARD / LRCFP documents [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. A third clan signed the co-management agreement called the Sehyi Clan but were not represented at the workshop [↑](#endnote-ref-4)