



Prospects for Community Forestry in Liberia: Implementing the National Forest Policy

Sustainable Development Institute (SDI)

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Executive summary

Liberia's new National Forestry Policy is an important document which makes clear that a major re-orientation of the forestry sector will be required if it is to successfully address the challenges facing the country. These challenges concern the need both to substantially improve forest governance and to ensure that the sector contributes much more effectively than hitherto to the alleviation of poverty. The Policy recognises that the role of government will have to change to meet the demand for greater public participation in the sector.

This paper seeks to map out a course for the development of community involvement in forest management in Liberia which is consistent with the Policy's underlying preoccupations and with the 2006 National Forestry Reform Law. It draws on recent experience in Africa and elsewhere, particularly in areas where timber values are high and there is a powerful forest industry, and applies this to the context of Liberia, where upland rice production under shifting cultivation and high dependence on wild animal protein form the bedrock of the rural economy.

It argues that Liberia offers a highly favourable environment in which to develop an approach to forest co-management that:

- Addresses the poor governance that has blighted the forestry sector in the past and catastrophically destabilised the country
- Contributes significantly to poverty alleviation
- Makes a major contribution to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
- Satisfies the demands of sound environmental management.

The approach outlined also seeks to assist Liberia to embrace the new opportunities that are likely to be available to forest-rich countries, deriving from the role of forest conservation in mitigating the effects of climate change, and the substantial inward financial flows that may result. The approach supports the proposals for community land rights and community empowerment put forward in a parallel paper of the SDI (Alden Wily, 2007).

The paper calls for a much stronger and more systematic approach to community involvement in forest management than is implied by community forestry in the restricted sense of compartmentalised and isolated 'community forests', and/or community involvement in pilot field projects of an artisanal character. Rather, communities should be able to play a full role in the management of forests and other natural resources, as part of a broader process of local government reform. The essence of such an approach must be the collective ownership by communities of their traditional land and forest resources, as custodians of public goods, and their management according to high standards of governance. Only then will communities be empowered to interact successfully with a powerful forest industry in ways that subordinate partisan commercial interests to local and national concerns.

International experience points to a number of conclusions:

- a. Scepticism of any attempt to reduce community forestry and community-based forest conservation to small-scale project interventions (often biased towards 'non-commercial' activities), involving community labour schemes, alternative income-generating approaches and approaches to conservation that ask communities to police themselves against their own livelihoods strategies.
- b. Small-scale timber production and transformation projects are undoubtedly of interest (being potentially many times more lucrative than informal payments from loggers, and providing a useful way of integrating young adult males into the rural economy), but these should be considered as an interesting support and complement to more radical and generalised tenurial and governance reform, and not a substitute for them.
- c. Attention should focus principally on the fate of fiscal revenues, especially the land rental tax and tree felling tax (stumpage). The present proposals for sharing the land rental tax with communities and Counties have very limited ambition, and are unlikely to make a serious contribution to governance reform. There is currently no provision for sharing the stumpage tax, except to support

the protected area network. Stumpage is likely to be the most valuable of the forestry taxes, as well as central to prospects for sustainable forest management. Properly managed, according to principles of accountability and transparency within a democratic system of local government, a meaningful community share of fiscal revenues could contribute significantly to the financing of cash-starved rural public services. It would also contribute to poverty alleviation and the achievement of the MDGs.

At the institutional level, the situation in Liberia is very favourable:

- Rural communities are meaningful social entities in a way that contrasts markedly with the situation in many other parts of West Africa, being relatively very homogeneous and coherent.
- Community identities are well integrated into systems of local government.
- Chieftaincies are usually elective and are representative of their populations to an unusual degree; there are checks and balances within the chieftaincy system.
- Tribal boundaries tend to be clear and stable, and traditional resource rights are exclusive and well-recognised.
- Where conflicts occur, there are established and legitimate systems for their resolution.

For the improved management of forest resources, there is the need for a strong and robust legal entity at the community level, which transcends the individual or small group interest. The present report favours:

- a. A *collective interpretation* of community ownership.
- b. An approach which builds on the *existing representative forms of local government* at community level; the fundamental building blocks for community involvement in forest management would depend on local interests and decisions, and will vary according to the local context; but whatever the appropriate form, this will be one which is anchored in the rural society, has proven competence and legitimacy in managing natural resources (including land) and is able to positively sanction social behaviour.
- c. *Forest management committees* would function as an expression of the traditional land-holding group, within an established system of local government.

This approach is justified by:

- the track record of the system of traditional authority,
- by its importance in local government
- by the need to link local resource use to locality within an established structure of social control, discouraging itinerant exploitation
- by the need to avoid elite capture

Administrative controls over natural resources would be applied through the structures of local government, supporting the principles of transparency, accountability and equity. Thus, the ideal would be for community forest management committees to be integrated into the local government structure in the context of the broader governance reform, involving traditional authorities as well as other key community representatives (for women and youth, for example). Community forest management committees would also be democratically elected, either from within the ranks of the elected authorities, or separately. Procedures for community involvement in national forest and protected area management would be contingent on the legislation (and the future zoning of the forest estate), in the light of the national governance reform process currently under way, but a significant role for communities is quite compatible with the requirements of good governance. Even with the low population densities in most rural areas, such involvement is an essential pre-condition for sound and sustainable natural resource management.

There are a number of reasons for seeking to put in place this approach to community involvement in forest management at the present time:

- The urgency of the reform of governance and the alleviation of poverty given the recent history of Liberia.
- The fact that the concession timber industry is not yet re-established, which decreases the likely opposition to good governance reforms.
- The need to address new policy initiatives emerging at the international level, chiefly around the subjects of forest carbon and avoided deforestation ('reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation' or *REDD*); if Liberia is to benefit from such initiatives over the longer term, this will require a much better integration of forest management with the structures of central and local government.

- Liberia's unique resources of biodiversity, which are unmatched anywhere in Africa.
- The potential of community involvement in forest management to help reach the MDGs by the 2015 target date.

Liberia's exceptional forest resources are both an opportunity and a threat. There is a major opportunity to preserve these resources for the future benefit of the country and the global community, but there is also a significant threat in that the forces

which have depleted forest resources elsewhere in Africa may now turn their attentions to Liberia for want of alternatives.

Liberia has an exceptional potential for a more progressive and healthy development of the forest sector, unparalleled in the West African sub-region. Community forestry – and community involvement in forest management in a broader sense – are well placed to contribute very substantially to this process of change.

List of Acronyms

CCC	Civilian conservation corps
CCSF	Community-controlled state forests (The Gambia)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FDA	Forest Development Authority, RL
FFI	Fauna and Flora International (UK-based NGO)
FOB	Free on Board
GoL	Government of Liberia
LACE	Liberia Agency for Community Empowerment
LISGIS	Liberia Institute of Statistics and Geo-Information Services
MDGs	Millennium development goals
NTFP	Non-timber forest products
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PAN	Protected Area Network
REDD	Reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation
SDI	Sustainable Development Institute
USAID	US Agency for International Development

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1. Introduction

Community forestry can be described as ‘any situation that intimately involves local people in forestry activity’ (FAO, 1978), or alternatively as ‘the processes and mechanisms that enable those people who have a direct stake in forest resources to be part of decision making in some or all aspects of forest management, from managing resources to formulating and implementing institutional frameworks’ (after Reeb, quoted by Moss *et al*, 2007).

There has been much discussion in recent months of the potential roles of community forestry – and community involvement in forest management in general – in the reform of the forest sector in Liberia. The thinking of the Government of Liberia is set out in the new Forestry Policy of 2006, and elaborated in an associated strategy statement, as well as in ‘The National Forestry Reform Law’ (September 2006 ~ henceforth ‘the 2006 Law’). Proposals with policy implications (but as yet unadopted) include ‘A Business Plan for the National Protected Area Network of the Republic of Liberia’ of 15 June, 2006.¹

There is also provision in the 2006 Law for the enactment of a comprehensive law governing community

rights with respect to Forest Land². This paper is part of a programme of research conducted by the SDI as a contribution to fulfilling this latter requirement.

The paper explores the implications of the new Policy with regard to community forestry, and considers the extent to which the requirements of the Policy are likely to be realised within the present Strategy and the provisions of the 2006 Law.

It argues that Liberia provides a highly favourable environment in which to develop a new approach to forest co-management, which addresses the serious governance concerns that have blighted the forestry sector in the past, while also contributing to both poverty alleviation/the realisation of the MDGs and to sound environmental management. The approach outlined would help Liberia embrace the new opportunities that are likely to be available to forest rich countries, deriving from the role of forest conservation in mitigating the effects of climate change, and the substantial financial flows that may arise as a result. The arguments presented here are in line with the recommendations for community land rights and community empowerment contained in a parallel paper of the SDI (Alden Wily, 2007).

2. The forestry policy

The aims of the new Forestry Policy are presented in the document, '*National forestry policy and implementation strategy: Forestry for communities, commerce and conservation*'. The Preface to the new Policy acknowledges the two underlying and fundamental aims – higher order objectives – that underpin the policy and have led to its elaboration. These are:

- *Governance reform*: The need to reform forest governance, to ensure that the sector no longer contributes to the poor governance that has plagued the country over the last twenty years, and which was a major contributing factor to the fuelling of the civil war. The document acknowledges that the rehabilitation and reorientation of the forestry sector in Liberia will be required if the governance challenges are to be met.
- *Poverty alleviation*: the new policy aims to benefit all of Liberian society, 'but with a special emphasis on the contribution of the sector to poverty alleviation'. This has two aspects:
 - The provision of environmental goods and services;
 - Economic development of the nation.

The Policy also identifies the need for changes which might affect both objectives. For example: 'It is also expected that the role of government will need to change in the future to reflect the demand for greater public participation in the sector'.

Elaboration of the policy provides further evidence of the need for reform and the directions which the reforms are expected to take. Nine 'guiding principles' are identified for the development of the sector. (pp.7-8) These are:

- Sustainable development* – in relation to the full range of forest goods and services (including timber and products and also NTFPs such as bushmeat);
- Poverty Alleviation* – which is further elaborated to include an appropriate contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, with the implication that the goal is not just to alleviate but also to reduce poverty, while also protecting the environment and increasing food security.

- Public participation and awareness* – to improve the quality of policy implementation through partnerships involving government, the private sector, communities and other stakeholders.
- Inter-sectoral collaboration* – acknowledging the overlaps with policy on agriculture, mining, energy and the environment, and the need to engage with broader national development goals.
- The need to address key issues relating to *the rule of law*, including strengthening of forest governance and law enforcement and resolving problematic issues regarding land tenure.
- National policy commitment* – recognition that the success of the policy will depend on the commitment of the Government to implement the reforms.
- Capacity building* – strengthening of the financial, human and technical capacities of all relevant stakeholders.
- Regional and international cooperation* – particularly with neighbouring countries with straddling resources.
- Monitoring and evaluation* – adopting a policy of continuous review.

This discussion leads to the elaboration of a National Forestry Policy statement, with a single aim and eight objectives (See the *Policy, Box One*). All the objectives are of relevance to the arguments which follow, particularly Objectives 1, 3, 4 and 5.

2.1 The Strategy

The 'Implementation Strategy' provides the framework for the realisation of the new Policy. However, the present Strategy is lacking in detail on how the objectives might be realised, and is notably vague in its presentation of some of the key areas of community interest. Particular areas of concern are:

- The nature of community involvement in concession management;
- The scope of other forms of community involvement in forest management, particularly commercial activities;

Box One: National Forestry Policy Statement

Aim: To conserve and sustainably manage all forest areas, so that they will continue to produce a complete range of goods and services for the benefit of all Liberians and contribute to poverty alleviation of the nation, while maintaining environmental stability and fulfilling Liberia's commitments under international agreements and conventions.

Objectives:

1. To ensure that commercial forestry, community forestry and forest conservation activities are integrated and balanced to optimize the economic, social and environmental benefits from the forest resource.
2. To conserve a representative sample of forest ecosystems so that important environmental functions are maintained.
3. To contribute to the national development goals of poverty alleviation and increased food security by increasing the opportunities for forest-based income generating activities.
4. To grant more equitable access to forest resources so that the potential for future conflict is reduced and the benefits from forestry development are shared throughout Liberian society.
5. To ensure that all stakeholders participate in the formulation of forestry policies and in the conservation and management of the forest resource.
6. To maximize the contribution of the sector to income, employment and trade through the development of appropriate processing activities.
7. To ensure that forestry development contributes to national development goals and international commitments (including regional cooperation and trans-boundary issues) and is co-ordinated with other relevant branches of government.
8. To ensure that activities in the forestry sector (including forest management, plantation development, harvesting, conservation and industrial development) are based on sound scientific and technical principles.

[2006: Para 4, Sub-paras 4.1 and 4.2]

- Community roles in wildlife management;
- Links with other sectors, particularly agriculture;
- Forest revenue generation and control.

This paper will comment on these ambiguities (this Section), and later offers a view on their resolution (Section 5).

2.1.1 Forest industry

Consider, for example, the section on *forest concession management*. This begins with a warning not to expect too much by way of positive social and environmental outcomes:

'In forest concessions, sustainable forest management should maintain the capacity of the forest to produce future harvest. In addition to this, it must also be economically viable and, wherever possible, provide social and environmental benefits or, at the very least, seek to minimize or eliminate any negative impacts of forest management.' (Para 5.1, *Background*)

However, among the proposed activities is one which, if properly realised, could well impact very positively on both governance and poverty:

'5.1.4. Develop and implement a mechanism to share the benefits from forest concession activities between the government, private sector and local communities'.

This could well be the foundation of an effective forestry policy, though it is notably unelaborated in this document. Clearly, the ways in which benefits will be shared with communities are of vital importance for the realisation of the aims of the Policy, as regards both good governance and the alleviation of poverty.

2.1.2 Community involvement in forest management

The section on *community forestry* (Section 6) is likewise imprecise. This is especially the case with regard to the distinction between 'community' and 'communal' forests.

The text begins quite radically:

'In addition to the need for greater involvement of local people in all aspects of the forestry sector, special attention should be given to the potential for forests to contribute more to local people and communities'. (Para 6, opening remarks)

But it then becomes more ambiguous:

‘The strategy for community forestry will focus on the production of bushmeat, wood energy and other non-wood forest products, as well as the management of forests by local communities to meet a variety of different objectives.’ (*Ibid*)

Notwithstanding the potentially catch-all nature of the last clause, the focus would appear to be on the non-timber sub-sector where there is no large-scale commercial interest. Otherwise, the singling out of ‘bushmeat, wood energy and non-wood forest products’ would be hard to explain. That said, it is difficult to be sure whether the rest of the section is entirely consistent with this interpretation. For example, there is mention of the role of community forestry in meeting the objectives of the Forestry Policy, including Objective 3 (poverty alleviation) and Objective 4 (equitable access to forest resources). Activity 5.1.5 is specifically mentioned; this relates to the need to ‘develop and implement procedures for awarding concessions or licences to local communities and local, small-scale enterprises.’ However, where the forms of land use are specified which might translate such procedures into reality, a rather restricted concept of community involvement appears to be implied. Thus, Para 6.1.4 (the fourth of the proposed activities under the rubric of community forestry) states:

‘Activity 6.1.4: Locate and practice community forestry on communal land.’

The phrase ‘communal land’ does not appear anywhere in the 2006 National Forest Law, nor is it defined in the Policy. The nearest legal class is ‘communal forest’, for which the permitted forms of land use are identified with precision. Section 1.3 of the 2006 Law (‘Definitions’) identifies a communal forest as:

‘An area set aside by statute or regulation for the sustainable use of forest products by local communities or tribes on a non-commercial basis’.

Similarly, Section 9.10 (‘Protected Forest Area Regulations and Prohibitions’) states that:

‘No person shall.....(iii) In communal forests, prospect, mine, farm, or extract timber for commercial use.’

Thus, if an association between ‘communal land’ and ‘communal forests’ can be assumed, then the implication is to narrow down the options for community forestry to purely non-commercial purposes. This perhaps throws light on an ambiguous section of the Policy with regard to ‘forest management for

conservation, community and commercial uses’ (Box 2, Page 7). This defines community forestry separately from commercial forestry. Commercial forestry is seen as ‘the production and processing of wood and non-wood forest products for profit’. Community forest management makes no direct mention of commercial intent, though it includes:

‘.....the production of wood and non-wood forest products, plus the use of forests for other purposes such as: cultural rituals; future farmland and settlement areas; the protection of sacred sites. Community forest management focuses more on the interests of the people who live in and on the fringes of forest areas.’

The potential for multiple uses is also recognised. Thus:

‘In many cases, these uses [commercial/community/conservation] can be combined. For example, timber production can be combined with a certain amount of forest conservation in a national forest, or community forest management can include the commercial production of forest products (in which case production would be governed by the rules established for commercial forestry). However, in some cases, it is necessary to focus almost exclusively on a single main use of the forest.’

There is a lack of clarity here, which suggests that the underlying political interests have not yet been resolved. Part of the text would seem to equate community forestry with non-commercial uses while another part doesn’t make this association. In the latter case, commercial uses may not be actively promoted but they appear not to be precluded. An alternative interpretation would be that the intention is only to specify the forms of exploitation that are permitted on particular classes of land – in which case the potential association between ‘community forest management’ and ‘commercial production’ in the above quotation may be merely intended to allow for forest industry to be practised on community land, without implying the right of communities to engage in that industry.

This ambiguity about the intentions for community forestry is evident also in the Law. Like the Policy, the Law (see: Chapter 3, ‘Objectives of forest management’) underlines the contribution that forest management can make to sound environmental management, sustainable development of the economy, public participation and poverty alleviation (although governance reform is conspicuously absent from this section of the Law, despite the fact that the consequences of poor governance are noted in the preamble).

‘Communal forests’ and ‘community forestry’ would appear to be separable areas of interest under the Law:

Para 4.4. (d) ‘In the strategy, the authority shall identify:
....
(ii) Specific areas that the authority intends to propose for management as communal forests and for purposes of community forestry;’

By contrast with ‘communal forest’, ‘community forestry’ is defined in a way that permits (or, at least, does not preclude) both commercial and non-commercial use:

Community forestry: ‘The governance and management of forest resources in designated areas, by communities for commercial and non-commercial purposes to further their livelihoods and development. “Community” in the sense of community forestry means a group of local residents who share a common interest in the use and management of forest resources, with traditional or formal rights to the land and the forests on it.

An interesting question is thus raised as to the purposes that are to be permitted for community forestry, other than those related to communal forests, and what forest zones will be available for exploitation by communities. The above definition does not, for example, specify that commercial exploitation by communities would necessarily imply permission to engage in timber production, leaving open the possibility that commercial activity might be restricted to bushmeat, wood energy and other non-wood forest products, as per the orientation of elements of Para 6 of the Strategy, discussed above.

In summary, the extent to which community involvement in forest management might include both the governance of the sector (including the management of forest revenues) and the commercial exploitation of timber are clearly issues in need of clarification. The danger is that a narrow view of what is permissible in one form of community involvement will be used to restrict the ambitions of community forestry in general. There is no *a priori* reason why ‘communities’ should be limited in their ambitions so as to exclude commercial activities, nor to prevent them from involvement in commercial forestry. Such restrictions would look to be a recipe for sustaining, rather than alleviating, poverty.

2.1.3 Bushmeat and hunting

These are covered in Para 6.2 of the Policy. This section recognises the importance of bushmeat as the dominant source of animal protein for Liberians,

but notes the danger that hunting could become unsustainable, and reports the prevalence of protected species in the trade.

While policy statements in comparable countries in Africa are often unrealistically restrictive and punitive (tending to outlaw all locally practicable forms of wildlife harvesting), the 2006 Liberia Law seems more realistic in its broad intentions. Thus, Chapter 9.11 (‘Wildlife Conservation’) pledges the FDA, by ‘Regulation, (to) control hunting to achieve sustainable harvests’.

However, the activities outlined in the Strategy of Implementation do not promise much by way of active management in pursuit of sustainable development. These are listed as:

- 6.2.1 Enforce the ban on hunting of all protected wildlife species in Liberia.
- 6.2.2 Design and implement programs to support income generating activities in rural communities as an alternative to commercial hunting.
- 6.2.3 Design and launch a national awareness campaign about bushmeat and hunting issues.

Evidently, there is a considerable gulf between ‘management’ of game hunting to support local livelihoods, and ‘management’ in the sense of controls over the same activities to prevent them contributing to livelihoods, supported by investments in alternatives to ensure the same. Links can be made from these activities to the Strategy for forest conservation (Para 7) which also puts heavy emphasis on community involvement interpreted as a reduction in the use of wildlife resources:

- 7.1.2 Increase community participation in wildlife management in all forest areas and, in particular, through collaborative management of protected areas.
- 7.1.3 Increase public awareness of forest conservation issues.
- 7.1.4 Strengthen and improve alternative livelihood opportunities to reduce rural dependence on forests and wildlife.

Ecotourism (Para 7.3) is presented in a way that is compatible with this restricted perspective. The only one of these activities which might impact on the aims of the Policy is the alternative livelihood opportunities – though the nature of these is conjectural.

2.1.4 Links with other sectors

As regards *cross-cutting activities*, the Strategy notes the crucial importance of secure tenure for both equity



Bushmeat is the main source of protein in Liberia

and sound management, and the fact that increasing government control over land and natural resources ‘has led to many of the problems described’ (Para 8.1). Though lacking flesh, Activity 8.1.2 listed in this section of the Strategy appears to suggest the fairly radical re-examination of tenurial regimes that might be anticipated to follow from this analysis:

- 8.1.2 Review the existing laws on forest land tenure and ownership and, within the forest estate, identify, classify and map forest areas by ownership and define the ownership and management rights and responsibilities of different forest users.

The meaning of ‘within the forest estate’ is, however, unclear. It might be interpreted to imply community tenure, though it could equally be used to indicate areas in which, under the 1956 Liberian Code of Laws, communities are to be allowed no major roles. In other terms also, this section hints at a rather traditional conception of land use in forested areas, with a clear demarcation between ‘forest land use’ (‘the total forest estate’, ‘allocation of forest areas’, etc.) and land use change towards other uses.

Para 8.2 of the Strategy (‘Public Administration’) is the main area in which the governance challenges of forest sector management are confronted. Para 8.4 (Legislation and law enforcement) is largely complementary to this section. Thus, among the activities indicated are:

- 8.2.1 Introduce sound financial management, including independent oversight of expenditure and revenue collection, regular revision of forest charges and adequate funding to implement forest policy.
- 8.2.2 Improve transparency and accountability, by strengthening the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of all activities.
- 8.2.3 Raise the level of performance of the Forestry Development Authority staff, to ensure independence, accountability and professional management.
- 8.2.4 Improve public participation in the sector through consultation with all relevant stakeholders about the future design and implementation of policy.
- 8.2.5 Increase efficiency by decentralizing decision making and delegating authority (where this is feasible and appropriate) and minimizing the costs of complying with forest laws and regulations.

These could provide potential powerful tools for governance reform, although their impact will clearly depend on the extent to which participation in the sense of mere consultation (Para 8.2.4) is complemented by capacity for meaningful decentralised decision making and delegated authority (Para 8.2.5).

2.1.5 Forest revenue generation and expenditure

The fiscal regime is not covered in the Policy or Implementation Strategy, and is given only partial treatment in the 2006 Law.

Chapter 14 of the Law addresses the fiscal provisions. Three forms of forestry fees are specified, namely:

- i) Stumpage
- ii) Land rental fees
- iii) Forest Product fees

Rather limited information is provided on the distribution of the income to be so derived. Chapter 14.2 (e) indicates that:

- Ten percent of stumpage shall be used to support the PA Network (see Chapter 9 of the same law); ten percent of Forest Product fees will be used for the same purpose.
- ‘Thirty percent of land rental fees (will go) to communities entitled to benefit sharing and Forest Resources Licenses; thirty percent of land rent

fees to Counties; and forty percent of land rental fees to the Ministry of Finance to hold as part of the general revenues of the Republic in accordance with Section 7 of the Reform Tax Code.'

Chapter 14.2 (f) states that 'The Authority shall by Regulation establish a fair and transparent procedure for allocating fees to communities and to Counties under Subsection (e) of this Section'.

The procedure in question has since been defined in the document 'Ten Core Regulations' of the Forest Development Authority (Regulation Seven, Part III Section 32).

Once the 10% contribution has been paid to the Protected Area fund, the remaining 90% of stumpage and forest product fees is to accrue entirely to the Central Government (the logic is that the land rental fees would provide a stable revenue to communities, while the conservation tax [10%] would allow the government to repair any damage done by industrial logging).

The counties-level component of the land rental fees (30%) is to be paid into a 'County Forestry Development Fund' and expended on services and activities in the public interest that benefit residents of the County.

The community component of the land rental fees (30%) is to be paid into a 'National Community Benefit Sharing Trust' which is to be managed by a philanthropic board, for the sole benefit of affected communities. This will dispense grants to 'Community Forest Development Communities' to undertake projects on behalf of the affected communities they represent, in response to detailed and budget project proposals. The Trust Board will operate at national level and have six members, including one Paramount Chief ('selected by his peers from a forest dependent community') as well as one representative each of: the Government of Liberia, national civil society, international NGOs, the logging industry and international donors. The Trust is to develop guidelines for the allocation of funds to applicant affected communities in due course. Strict rules are provided in the Regulations as to who can and cannot benefit from a grant from the Trust. For example, the main representatives of the state are ineligible *ex officio* (including district commissioners; paramount, clan, town and quarter chiefs, and also the members of the Community Forest Development Committees).

2.2 Concluding Remarks – Section 2

Some interesting possibilities are thus raised as to the nature of the proposed community involvement in forest management. However, there is as yet rather little flesh on the proposals, and the Policy and Law do not provide a clear basis to define a community strategy. Ambiguities in the texts mean that there are a number of ways of interpreting the intentions of the law, with radically different implications depending on which interpretation is given. On one interpretation, community involvement might be permissible across the full range of forest sector activities, from supervision of the industry to active community involvement in production and trade of wood and non-wood products. On another, community forestry could be restricted to non-commercial activities, very much in line with the existing rural economy, and offering nothing substantially new.

In such circumstances, the key question that is raised is the following: '*What is now required to realise the Forestry Policy in line with the nine principles for action, while also addressing the two underlying concerns of governance reform and poverty alleviation, and respecting the terms of the 2006 Law?*'

From the perspective of the communities, there are four main foci of interest:

1. What roles are to be offered to communities in relation to the range of forest management issues covered by the Policy and Law?
2. In what ways will these roles satisfy the twin concerns of good governance and poverty alleviation, while also addressing the needs for environmental sustainability and conservation of biodiversity?
3. What are the implications for other concerns of the Policy ~ for example, cross-sectoral collaboration?
4. What are the implications for other national concerns, such as land policy?

To seek to answer these concerns, we need to pose two further questions:

- What factors in the Liberian rural economy have to be taken into account, when considering the implementation of the Strategy?
- What lessons can be learnt from past experience in other countries which might help put flesh on the strategy?

We will deal with these in turn.

3. Forest exploitation and the rural economy

Developing a strategy for community involvement in forest management in the Liberian context requires a careful understanding of local conditions, and acknowledgement of the constraints that local conditions impose. While the rural economy is not a static one, and is subject to a process of continual change, a compelling case would be needed to justify any proposals for forest sector management that are incompatible with the dynamics of the existing agricultural economy, particularly where the effects would worsen rural livelihoods. Among other things, such changes would contradict the aim of the Policy to alleviate poverty. In addition, questions would be raised as to what other measures would need to be put in place to compensate the rural dwellers for present income and welfare foregone. As will be later discussed, no obvious and proven alternatives are available.

Liberia's rural economy is subject to some regional variations, but the following are indicative. Two features of the present agricultural landscape are likely to be critical to the development potential of community forestry: these are *relatively low population densities in rural areas*, and *viability of shifting cultivation*.

3.1 Land pressure

Liberia has historically been outside the mainstream of economic activity in the West African region, with no major river systems, predominantly lateritic soils of low fertility and systems of commerce that are weakly integrated with the major routes of intra-West African trade. The country is relatively under-populated by the standards of its African neighbours, and rural population has been notably low in historical terms. *Inter alia*, this has meant that, except in areas where land has been taken over by large-scale commercial enterprises in the 'enclave economy', land pressure in the rural areas has also been quite low. The main enclave investments are well known: the Firestone million acre concession and its Cavalla Plantation, other large rubber plantations (Guthrie Rubber, Sinoe Rubber, IAC Rubber), and the iron ore mines. Though pressure is growing, it still seems unlikely that land pressure is a major source of social conflict in the rural economy away

from these enclave sites, or a major constraint on agricultural practices in other areas. The situation in urban and peri-urban areas may differ, however.

This view is contested by some, most notably Paul Richards and his colleagues, in their recent works on the origins of the Liberian civil war. Thus, in Richards *et al* (2005), it is argued that 'War in Liberia reflects a long-term agrarian crisis based on inter-generational tensions and the failure of rural institutions'. Lack of access to land is identified as a contributing factor. While acknowledging the importance of agro-industrial enterprises in creating land pressures, their analysis goes beyond this, and they claim that indigenous structures and customs are themselves a source of conflict and tension. As to the potential for resettlement, 'Land access problems hamper the most severely socially excluded groups... who would have only weak land rights



Shifting cultivation is the bedrock of the Liberian economy



The rice harvest

were they to return [home]' (2005, pp. vi-vii, 21).³ Other authors have also claimed a high incidence of land conflicts and have linked this to the civil war, making the inference that these can be related to growing population pressure (e.g. USAID, 2007).

The present author has not had access to the information base on which any of these claims might be assessed but is generally sceptical of them. There is no reliable evidence that land conflicts fuelled the civil war and little evidence of land pressure in the post-war period except in some well-known locations. Thus, even in an area such as Kanwee in Nimba County, where access to rural land is constrained by well-established commercial rubber plantations often owned by non-local entrepreneurs, informants indicated that there was still no major shortage of farm land. In other areas, such as Konobo District in eastern Grand Gedeh County, land pressure is even less.

3.2 Viability of shifting cultivation

Farming systems in Liberia have historically been heavily dependent on the restoration of fertility through alternating cycles of cultivation and set-aside, commonly known as 'shifting' or 'swidden' cultivation. They continue to be so to this day. Though, in Liberia as elsewhere, fallow systems are often maligned by outsiders as outmoded and wasteful and offering poor returns, there is considerable evidence that they represent a very rational model for forest exploitation, with favourable returns to the main constraint on production (labour, not land, being the limiting factor on production in most areas). The arguments here are in line with those proposed forty years ago by the great theorist of fallow systems, Ester Boserup (1966).

Shifting cultivation can be considered wasteful to the extent that timber species of present or future commercial value are cut during the clearance phase, and in some cases at least, the specimens in question may have high market values as timber species, comparable to, or even much greater than, the value of the crops planted in their place. However, this argument only pertains where high timber value species *are* removed; more often, shifting cultivation tends to concentrate in areas of secondary, rather than old growth, forest; the latter are often avoided because of the high labour costs of their clearance, as well as their isolation and vulnerability to forest pests. Of equal importance, the critique of shifting cultivation also assumes that the values foregone would have been available, at least in part, to the farmer whose decision it was to cut the tree. However, almost without exception, the values which might be obtained from preventing farmers from cutting down timber trees would, under recent forest management policies, accrue entirely to outside entrepreneurs and the state, rather than to the individual decision-makers on the ground. In such a situation it is not surprising that the latter continue to clear forest areas in the established fashion. For them to alter their behaviour would require a fundamental change in the incentive regime.

Given the relatively low population densities in Liberia, shifting cultivation is still generally a viable agricultural system in most parts of the country, and is the mainstay of the rural economy. Some alternatives have been tried, for example permanent rice cultivation in swampy areas, which overcomes the problem of low moisture in the upland soils outside of the rainy season. Such schemes have not yet been evaluated, but given the heavy labour inputs involved (for stumping and biomass removal, bunding and land preparation) as well as the disease risks from permanent cultivation, there are grounds to wonder whether this system is well suited to the needs of the average small farmer. In many peri-urban areas, it is cash-rich entrepreneurs who have profited most from the potential of irrigated agriculture, not cash-strapped small farmers constrained by low purchasing power, lack of inputs and limited supplies of labour.

Land is not, however, a free good in Liberia. The extent of land availability varies from area to area. Even in areas of lowest population density and highest cover, access to land is limited by the existing zoning of the forest estate into national forests (which are intended for forest industry development) and forest lands outside of national forests. There are also two national parks. The original zoning into

national forests and other forests (in 1959) appears to have been intended to restrict concession logging to the national forests, but in the event this did not occur, and industrial logging has been permitted by successive governments since the 1970s in all areas with timber values, regardless of their designation.

While agriculture has not been allowed in national forests, both agriculture and timber concessions have been permitted outside of them. Farmers have generally respected the interdiction, and most seem also to be doing so at present. This is despite the fact that maintaining fertility in shifting cultivation systems requires that farmer decision making covers areas that are substantially larger (ideally 10 x greater at least) than the areas actively cultivated at any particular time (while farmers might be tempted to transgress the national forest boundary for rice cultivation, to benefit from the fertility of soils in the high forest zone, rice cultivation is often succeeded by other longer-cycle crops, including cocoa and oil palm, profiting from the earlier land clearance; such perennial crops would be expected to be

Development of swamp rice production may relieve pressure on the forest, though its viability is still unproven in Liberian conditions.

discovered and destroyed by government patrols thus negating the benefits of encroachment into the forest estate).

The zoning of national forests creates a land pressure in some rural areas which might well affect the viability of traditional farming practices should population pressure continue to rise. The gazetting of the two national parks (and the planned expansion of one of them, the Sapo Park) would do likewise. Thus, farmers in an area of Konobo District reported (in May 2007) that the fallow cycle is now reduced to 7 years in some areas where it had once been 10 or more (expansion southwards being restricted by the northern boundary of the Grebo National Forest), and that this was contributing to a failure to fully recover soil fertility. While significant surplus lands still exist in parts of the District, these are far from present settlements, and thus would only be used as farmlands of the last resort. While the supply of fertile land appears manageable as of now, one can envisage a situation in which the fallow cycle shortens to such an extent to significantly lower production levels. As upland rice is a fairly risky crop, sensitive to timing and quantity of rainfall, this could lead to difficulties. The irony is that shifting cultivation is not necessarily incompatible with commercial



forestry, provided that farmers are brought into the decision making process with regard to the selection of economic specimens to be cut, and provided also that they are able to ensure that they will be properly compensated for the timber values and for any damage caused. While national policy makers tend to rail against the wastage implied by shifting cultivation, the only way in which farmers could be incentivised to modify their practices would be if they were to reap the benefits.

3.3 Other factors

There are a number of other aspects of the rural economy with implications for community forestry. For example, while low land pressure in many parts of Liberia is generally very positive for community forestry (in that it increases social cohesion, and leads to a well-assured supply of timber and plant/animal NTFPs), it is associated with poor rural/urban communications, and high costs of transport and marketing. As of now, there are relatively few commodities produced in the more distant rural areas which are of sufficient value *and* resilience to merit the high costs of marketing in the urban centres where purchasing power is concentrated. Smoked animal flesh ('bushmeat') is one such product, and often the only one available. In many areas, bushmeat hunting is the most lucrative occupation available to young adult males, and also provides an important component of the diet (three quarters or more of protein consumption is said to be from wild meat, on a national scale).⁴

3.4 Concluding Remarks – Section 3

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this brief review:

- a. The notion of a 'forest-farm boundary' is of limited meaning in areas of shifting cultivation; likewise the notion of a 'farm-forest divide'. Thus, any forestry initiative which impacts directly on communities and their livelihoods has inherent cross-sectoral implications, and needs to be considered in these terms. This requires an approach to forest policy which goes beyond the typical sectoral orientation. In present parlance, it requires a perspective that covers forested landscapes and not just forests in assumed opposition to agriculture.
- b. Present land use systems involving variants of shifting cultivation allied with bushmeat hunting have proven their resilience in a turbulent period of Liberian history, and are still the basis of liveli-

hoods in most rural areas. Calls for their abandonment need to be assessed against the viability of alternatives. While there is a case for some changes in practice – for example, regarding the conservation of timber species and the sustainable harvesting of wildlife – it is most unlikely that these will come about unless the individual decision makers experience the benefits of such restraint. In the case of timber, this would require that the farmer captures a significant proportion of the value of the product, and that this value is significantly superior to the value foregone (in terms, for example, of the soil fertility deriving from the degraded woody biomass). In the case of wild meat, changes in harvesting practice would require a high degree of future security of access to the resource, together with the ability of those who invest their labour in its management and who temporarily or permanently forego consumption, to exclude free riders from future access (cf. Ostrom, 1990).

- c. While population pressure in rural Liberia is generally quite low, there are important variations by area; loss of potential agricultural land to agribusiness or through the forest zoning system is an issue in some areas, and could well become one in others. New international investment initiatives, such as oil palm-based biofuels, could increase the demand for forest conversion in areas hitherto enjoyed by small farmer communities. Strategies for forestry development, of whatever types, are likely to have knock-on effects for rural livelihoods. If policy is to be both successfully implemented and socially just, these livelihood interests need to be addressed. Any extension of the national forests or investment areas would be expected to impact on length of fallows in affected areas. The existing zoning of the forest estate is arguably heavily skewed against the interests of the poor and makes no acknowledgement of the role of forests in maintaining soil fertility.
- d. The present zoning of forest lands needs to be revisited, with these considerations in mind. For example, if it proves to be the case that population pressures on rural land are increasing, and leading to serious social conflict, then this would argue for the degazettement of some of the national forest areas. Similarly, if industrial exploitation is to be permitted indiscriminately, in both gazetted national forests and undesignated forests (as was the case in the 1970s-90s), then the whole zoning policy would need to be revised, before a strategy for community forestry can be put in place.

Box Two: Notes On The Report: 'A Business Plan For The National Protected Area Network Of The Republic Of Liberia' (2006)

The report acknowledges the livelihood benefits of forest utilisation in Liberia, but the scenarios it paints are almost universally negative.

Though paying lip service to the rural economy, the approach largely ignores the realities and mainstays of it – and the two elements which have sustained the population while doing least damage to the population: *shifting agriculture* (to provide carbohydrates and vitamins) and *bushmeat hunting* (to provide protein). It states (p.57) that protected area policy must be sensitive to local livelihood and economic development needs – but no evidence is offered of what this might imply.

Shifting agriculture is mentioned only twice, both times in a very negative reference:

- Box on p.20 as a problem to be overcome
- P.55: 'shifting agriculture (is) a main threat to the sector'

Bushmeat hunting is acknowledged in the report to provide c. 75% of national protein needs – and it is estimated that it would cost \$100 mn. per year to replace. Clearly, the welfare implications of any policy which opposes bushmeat hunting would need to be addressed. The report fails to consider them, however, except (like the Forestry Policy) in terms of substitution through unspecified 'alternative livelihood development'. There is no discussion of what this might involve, and the section on food crop production makes no reference to any such alternatives or the roles that they might play in future agricultural strategy.

The CCC (civilian conservation corps) approach is at the core of the conservation strategy. It would be extremely costly to implement (the total national budget projection for the strategy is US\$15 million over five years [2006, Chapter 9], which is comparable to the present national budget for curative health). Its feasibility in present economic circumstances must be seriously doubted. In its philosophy, it looks to be a classic attempt to save rural communities from themselves.

USAID, FDA and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are piloting the CCC approach in association with NGOs such as Conservation International, LACE and FFI.

There is little evidence that present development initiatives are cognizant of the dynamics of the Liberian rural economy. For example, the 2006 Forest Law [Section 1.3] defines 'forest resources' and 'forest land' as follows:

Forest resources: Anything of practical, commercial, social, religious, spiritual, recreational, educational, scientific, subsistence, or other potential use to humans that exists in the forest environment, including but not limited to flora, fauna, and microorganisms

Forest land: A tract of land, including its flora and fauna, capable of producing forest resources, not including land in urban areas, land in permanent settlements, and land that has been in long-term use for non-shifting cultivation of crops or livestock in a manner that precludes producing forest resources.

Bruce (2007b:24) comments that these are extraordinarily broad definitions. They have the effect of bringing land under shifting cultivation within the legitimate purview of the forest industry. The only

agricultural land that is excluded from the forest definition is land that has NOT been used for shifting cultivation. Were this to be in recognition of the right of forest dwellers to the benefits of forest enterprise, it would be a commendable measure, with pro-poor dimensions. However, without such recognition, its effect is to seriously restrict communities' control over their own lands. The only exception would be on lands designated as 'communal forests'. As noted earlier, this category is obscure, though defined under the law as non-commercial and thus apparently excluded from exploitation for marketable timber (*Ibid*).

Legislative interpretations such as the above need to be located in a broader policy environment which is generally unappreciative of Liberian rural life, and often hostile to its realities. Thus, the 'Business Plan for Protected Area Development' of June 15, 2006, while claiming to want to safeguard local livelihoods, in fact seeks to constrain them, while proposing nothing in their place (see Box Two).

4. Learning from international experience

We now turn to the second strand of learning on which Liberia might draw; this is from international experience of community involvement in forest management. There have been numerous attempts to promote community forestry in countries in which forests are subject to multiple uses and interests. While these have had an uneven record, the breadth of their experiences allows one to abstract some key principles for effective action, and they present opportunities for Liberia to build on the successes and avoid the pitfalls of the past.

This review concentrates on recent experiences in areas with high timber values and a sizeable timber industry, with particular reference to Africa. The value of timber and the proximity of international timber markets exert very significant influences over the dynamics of community forestry in a country, and warn against any over-optimistic assumptions as to the compatibility of community and industrial interests. Where communities are to be allowed to manage the resource, then they need to be empowered to defend their interests against those of the industry.

4.1 Community forestry – a variety of meanings

Attempts to engage communities in forest management in such locations vary widely in their ambition, ranging from mere participation of communities in contract labour (for boundary demarcation and maintenance, for example), through involvement in small-scale timber production and transformation to co-management of the timber sector within a programme of decentralised local government.

Experience would warn strongly against the attempt to use communities merely as a supply of cheap labour, without any attempt to empower them to manage the resource. Clearly, such offers will be of interest to individuals in proportion to their desperation, but in all likelihood they will have no further resonances. They would not appear to merit being considered as part of genuine 'community forestry' initiatives, particularly where this involves heavy financial outlay of aid-related funds. Development

projects which promise community forestry but deliver only community labour rarely justify their costs, and their low impact leaves them very vulnerable politically.

4.2. Relations with the industry

'Community forestry as community labour' tends to be associated with attempts to refine the social contracts which producer governments usually require of industrial operators seeking to exploit forest concessions in populated rural areas. Contracts of this type are acknowledged in the 2006 Forest Bill (Section 5.3). Such social contracts are often popular with forest dwellers, in that they provide immediate and tangible benefits which can be negotiated directly with the logger in the field, and don't have to be transacted through the intermediary of a remote government department in a regional or national capital. However, it is arguable that they do little to improve the quality of forest governance – indeed, they might be said to actively undermine it, in that they substitute negotiated payments by powerful patrons to weak and marginalised clients

Abandoned logging roads, eastern Liberia



for the rights of citizens. In addition, the infrastructure provided rarely fits in with any social sectoral planning strategies, with the result that the outcome is often tokenistic and very short term - roads that go nowhere, log bridges that rot and collapse with the first rains, clinics and schools with poor facilities and no staff, and so on.

In relation to good governance considerations, and as part of a strategy of governance reform, it would seem much healthier to ensure that forest industries pay their taxes, and that these are used in predictable, transparent and accountable ways, within a democratic process to support national and local welfare. However, a corollary of this is that the requisite taxes ARE indeed paid, and the local services and benefits ARE indeed delivered to those who need them.

4.3 Community initiatives in an industrialised context

There is much to be learnt from the attempts of countries such as Cameroon to develop community forestry programmes with small-scale commercial exploitation as the initial entry point. In terms of poverty alleviation, this has real potential in that the returns to such endeavours can be 20 times greater than the payoffs negotiated informally between villagers and logging companies (Fometé and Vermaat, 2001). They tend also to go to sections of the population (predominantly young adult males) whom it may be important to incorporate into the cash economy. However, such enterprises are difficult to get off the ground where they pit the 'community David' into battle against the 'industrial Goliath'. It is unrealistic to expect community enterprise to prosper if it must compete with a rapacious and powerful industry, constantly in search of cheap timber to exploit. The fact that international pressures tend to be much greater at the concession end of the scale than at the small, local operator level only increases the tendency for the industry to seek to co-opt or suppress the local competition. One clear message is that, where community enterprise is to be promoted, then there need to be clear boundaries between it and the industry, otherwise there is a high risk of capture of community initiatives. Where the tax regime for community enterprise is preferential to that for heavy industry, then the risk of capture is only increased. That said, it should be noted that community enterprise is equally likely to be disadvantaged when compared with industry. For example, in the Cameroon case, communities are required to submit expensive management plans and inventories in advance of exploitation, whereas

industrial enterprises operating in the same zones are subject to almost no planning requirements at all. Even in the concession areas, the industry is granted a 3-year grace period in which to generate the funds it needs for management planning. In such instances, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion drawn by some recent research that the purpose of the regulations may be to prevent poor people climbing out of poverty, in order to preserve a milch cow for the industry (Larson and Ribot, 2007).

More successful in Cameroon has been the attempt to give communities a greater role in the governance of the sector, by putting in place transparent and accountable mechanisms for the distribution of forest taxes and revenues. The decentralised component of the forest revenue (which had long been nominally allocated but rarely delivered) is now actually handed over to the mayors of rural communes, announced on radio and witnessed by the public, and properly managed by democratic bodies for the public benefit. This not only provides much needed income to some hitherto impoverished local government authorities, but also increases the sense of responsibility of the community for the conduct of the industry. It stands to make a significant contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. However, the Cameroon situation stops short of giving communities the right of secure tenure of forest land. Were they to have such a right, then they would be even better placed to contribute to the co-management of the industry, and even more engaged to safeguard the future condition of the forest for the welfare of generations yet to come.

4.3.1 The issue of 'leakage'

Bringing communities into forest management requires that a broad view is taken - 'forest landscapes' rather than 'government forests'. This is necessary not only to accommodate the diversity of farming systems (particularly important in Liberia, given the prevalence of shifting cultivation), but also to avoid perverse effects. These are characterised in the literature as various forms of 'leakage' - that is, displacement of the negative activities that an intervention seeks to overcome out of a target zone into contiguous areas. In the community forestry programme in The Gambia, for example, farmers have lost access to bush areas as these have been converted into formal 'community forests' (Brown, 2002). While the latter have had beneficial effects and been embraced by the communities, an unintended side-effect has been to increase the clearance of forested areas outside of the community

forests to compensate for access rights foregone. The Gambian Government has countered by creating an additional category of forest – ‘community-controlled state forests’ (CCSFs), for which high-performing communities would be eligible to apply. These are forests in joint management or trusteeship, and successful communities would be eligible to receive additional benefits from them (equivalent to half the gross income received), in compensation for their conservation as forests with ecological integrity. However, while community forests are popular with villagers, CCSFs have proven much less so. The reason is that such designation would require farmers to surrender in perpetuity their claims over the lands in question, which are the areas with highest potential as farmland. By contrast, the areas designated as core ‘community forests’ tend to be much smaller, and more attractive for the benefits which they offer as permanent woodland. Thus, communities have been reluctant to surrender access rights to lands which they see as future expansion zones, while readily conceding those which they wished, anyway, to retain as forests.

A clear policy message from this experience is that, to be fully effective, community involvement in forest management has to cover the entire land management system pertaining to the community, not just small areas designated as ‘community forests’.

4.4 The importance of social context

Experiences of community management in West Africa have been much influenced by the social context, and in this respect, the Liberian context looks to be particularly favourable, because of its relative homogeneity. To an unusual degree, the concept of ‘community’ in rural Liberia is firmly anchored in social structure, and refers to a meaningful hierarchy of social units which can be mobilised for collective welfare. In addition, where populations are more heterogeneous, there are viable mechanisms to manage the potential negative effects. This contrasts with the situation elsewhere in the sub-region, where ‘community’ has questionable meanings and social constraints may be less tractable.

In Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire, for example, typical rural communities in the forest areas are socially very heterogeneous, and non-indigenes are often in the majority. These include a range of social categories: migrant farmers who have bought or leased forest farms; share-croppers in the cocoa-sector; and

migrant labourers. The migrants are found in greatest numbers in the more isolated areas which were formerly mature high forest areas, the indigenes preferring to farm in the more accessible areas closer to the main urban centres, where the necessary labour has already been expended to open them up to cultivation and communications. In Cameroon, on the other hand, rural communities tend to be more stable and less heterogeneous. However, encroachment by non-resident hunters and gatherers is widespread, and indigenous communities have no power to restrict the movements of such outsiders even on their own territories. Common property theory would warn that communities are unlikely to invest heavily in the management of their resources where they are unable to guarantee that they will be the primary beneficiaries of their efforts (cf. Ostrom, 1990).

An additional problem in Cameroon is that, under the decrees of application associated with the Forest Law of 1994, a ‘community’ can imply any number of persons from four upwards, provided they are formed into a recognised association. There has been (at least until recently) no formal requirement for the involvement of traditional or other local authorities. Nor is there any permanent residence requirement for community membership. This leaves community institutions very vulnerable to capture by elites, who are socially and geographically well-placed to use the law to take over valuable community lands, to the evident disadvantage of those in real need of them.

Rural communities in Liberia tend to be markedly more homogeneous than those in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. A clear policy message is that they need to be empowered to control access to their resources by outsiders, if they are to retain and further develop their interest in forest management. A second policy message is that, to avoid elite capture, community forestry institutions need to be well grounded in the structures of local government, including ‘traditional authorities’. High standards of transparency and accountability need to apply at these levels, just as much as in the higher reaches of central government.

A particularly interesting experience, from the point of view of community involvement in commercial production, is that of Mexico. This case is little known outside of Central America, but is instructive in the present context. The community forest sector in Mexico, though large and diverse, has a strong record in commercial production at varying levels of integration with national and international markets.

Production is centred on common property forests, and has been particularly strong in the last 30 years (Bray et al, 2005). The key to its success lies in the land reforms of the early twentieth century. While community lands had long existed in the country, being defined as land held in usufruct from the state, it was not until the Mexican Revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century that community land tenure was properly institutionalised. Reforms to the Mexican Constitution in 1992 strengthened community ownership of these lands. In legal terms, there are two main forms of community land – ‘community properties’ (*ejidos*), and ‘agrarian and indigenous communities’. Both forms establish collective governance of a common territory or property. While the experience is not without its problems (Mexico is a highly differentiated society, much more so than Liberia), it can nevertheless be considered a major success. A strong policy message from this case is the importance of land reform.

4.5 Wildlife management

There have been numerous attempts to involve communities in wildlife management in African forests, but all too often these have amounted to mobilising communities to police themselves against their own livelihood interests, and they have consequently proven unsustainable. Once the external stimulus is withdrawn, the community rapidly reverts to its pre-existing pattern of behaviour. Only where there is a sizeable and stable tourist industry (which usually involves a balance between national and international tourism, as in South Africa) are there any real prospects of linking strict conservation and community benefits. Even there, problems have arisen over the extent of the community benefits (for example, the ‘Campfire’ programme in Zimbabwe has enriched commercial operators much more than communities).

Outside of the existing tourist centres, the options have proven very limited. Experience would warn strongly against:

- Over-reliance on ‘alternative income generating projects’ to divert locals from existing patterns of wildlife usage. Many such projects are economically infeasible; captive rearing of vermin species such as grass-cutter [*Thryonomys* spp.], for example, where the free availability of wild animals for capture in the bush undercuts the investment costs of rearing them in confined conditions; or breeding of monogastrics such as pigs, where the main

constraint is likely to be animal feed, farmers lacking the free labour to produce sufficient additional feed for the animals in addition to the food they supply to their families, and where they also lack the financial means to cover the disease management costs associated with animal rearing in confined spaces; or introducing high yielding varieties of poultry (ditto); or exotic fruit and vegetable production, where the main problems are likely to be diseases and marketing; and so on. In the few cases where such projects have shown promise, they have been either undermined by the lack of market access for delicate and quick maturing produce, or the profits have been ploughed back into the activities that they are intended to replace (for example, new cash income used to buy guns and snare wire for hunting). The rationale, in conservation terms, of investing heavily in captive breeding of common and unthreatened vermin species must also be questioned.

- Awareness creation programmes have similarly often foundered, because they fail to understand the basis of behaviour that the programmes seek to change. Hunters are rarely unaware of the effects of their actions on the stock (they would surely be the first to realise that an animal species was in decline, if they had to substantially increase their investments of labour and time before they could encounter and bag their prey). The problem is usually one of lack of control not of awareness. All too often, awareness programmes have ended up encouraging children to denounce their parents, in circumstances where the latter have little choice over livelihood activities. This is questionable on both practical and moral grounds.

In summary, it is simply unrealistic to imagine that communities will give up established consumption patterns and claims to land access over which they have long exercised user rights, just because expatriate and middle class constituencies deem these environments to be ‘rich in threatened biodiversity’. If they are to change their consumption patterns – and this could well be desirable – then they need to be offered concrete incentives in advance of the interdiction, and those incentives need to be both guaranteed and sustained. Desired changes of behaviour are most unlikely to come from outsiders offering locals the prospect of hypothetical future benefits that rarely actually materialise even in the longer term.

4.6 Concluding Remarks – Section 4

Summarising this review of experiences elsewhere, we can draw a number of conclusions:

- a. A wide variety of practices is subsumed under the label of 'community forestry'. There is a huge difference between community participation in forest operations, as a cost-cutting and poverty alleviation measure, and mobilising communities as a lever for poverty eradication and governance reform. It is the latter which stand to have the biggest impact. Forces which would seek to preserve the *status quo* (chiefly supporters of the timber industry) are likely to attempt to domesticate the movement by repackaging and downgrading it as merely a cheap source of labour supply.
- b. There are important co-benefits to be had from treating community forestry as part of a wider package of governance reform, covering all aspects of natural resource management in a locality, in support of properly functioning and democratic local government.
- c. Community forestry activities need to be well-integrated with other sectors (including agriculture [in relation to tenure and fallow cycles] and local government [in relation to political decentralisation]).
- d. Strong local institutions are needed to convert the concept of 'community management' into a set of viable rules and organisations, which enjoy

Industrial logging has provided few long-term benefits for rural communities in Liberia



high credibility with their members, to the point where they are able to control access rights in a beneficial way, and sanction negative actions. Especially where community forestry is part of a programme of governance reform, these institutions need to conform to high standards of transparency and accountability.

- e. Tenure reform is the key to governance reform in the forest sector, but this needs to address community needs as well as those of the industry. The former is much more urgent than the latter. By the nature of the resources in question, tenure security needs to be long-term. This can be anticipated to have important positive knock-on effects on wider practices of land and wildlife management – for example, decision-making in relation to cutting of economic trees, and levels of offtake of wildlife.
- f. Where the aim is to promote community-level timber extraction in an area where the forest industry is powerful (and particularly where that industry provides finance for political parties), direct competition between the industry and community forestry is likely to be detrimental to the latter. Communities lack both the financial muscle and the political patronage to stand up to the industry. In such circumstances, the best option is likely to be a land zoning system which separates the territory for industrial logging from the territory for community enterprise. This zoning should refer to the management regime (community vs. commercial enterprise), and also to the technology (small scale extraction techniques vs. capital intensive logging). In this way, industrial forestry can be kept out of the territory of community forestry. This division does not necessarily preclude community involvement in the management of the industrial sector, however. For example, communities might have direct logging rights in their own territories and supervisory rights in a permanent forest estate.

5. Community forestry in Liberia – a way forward

The two main guiding lights for the development of a community forestry strategy in Liberia are the underlying principles, as stated in the National Forestry Policy, of:

- Governance reform
- Poverty alleviation

Given the recent history of Liberia and the progress of its economy, there are strong arguments in favour of a radical approach. Minor tinkering around the edges of the forest industry is unlikely to have much impact on governance, and there will be a real risk of the country slipping back into the chaos which has blighted the last two decades. The danger is that reconstruction of the Liberian economy on a foundation of unreformed extractive industries

Universal primary education is the second of the MDGs: there is strong recognition of the value of education throughout Liberia

(timber and minerals) will increase the likelihood of a reversion of the polity to violence and destruction. A less centralised forest economy – with broader supervision and control, with a greater range of local involvement in extraction and transformation and without the ‘point source’ characteristics of centrally controlled revenues – will be much less prone to these political distortions. Properly designed and managed, it would also provide the finance to achieve the MDGs and the employment opportunities to ensure that young adult males are not again tempted into lawlessness.

Similarly, if the goal of poverty alleviation is to be seriously addressed, then something more will be required than the safety net roles that forests already provide to the Liberian poor. Economic transformation will not be achieved by policies the effect of which is to exclude the rural majority from enjoying the riches of the forest to the benefit of an industry that has shown little ability to date to contribute to national development.⁵



5.1 Clarifying the policy

The present Policy offers the prospect of a real contribution to good governance and poverty eradication, but leaves many key issues unresolved, the resolution of which will be fundamental to the trajectory of community involvement in forest management. Is the aim of the Policy to genuinely reform the governance of the sector, or to repackage its past structure in more fashionable terms?

For example, with regard to the provisions of Para 6: *'The strategy for community forestry will focus on the production of bushmeat, wood energy and other non-wood forest products, as well as the management of forests by local communities to meet a variety of different objectives'*. This could well imply the full involvement of local communities in the governance of the sector, and through that, an enhanced and well-funded form of decentralised local government. However, it could equally be interpreted to imply 'business as usual', with community roles confined to those sub-sectors which are anyway difficult for government to control, with the concomitant proviso that communities will remain largely excluded from future benefits of the export-oriented timber economy. This would not be a recipe for the eradication of poverty, but rather a guarantee of its continuation.

A similar set of dilemmas apply to other key areas of policy impact where the Policy hints at the potential for radical change but remains vague on the actual intentions. For example:

- *Tenurial reform:*

Is the aim of the policy to put in place a tenurial regime the fundamental purpose of which is to safeguard the interests of industrial entrepreneurs, or is it to reform land, tree and wildlife tenure so as to permit rural communities to contribute meaningfully to the governance of Liberia's natural resources, and to link their own future decision making to the requirements for sustainable management?

- *Commercial usage:*

Is the aim to interpret the commercial/non-commercial polarity so as to exclude the possibility of communities benefiting from the transformation and sale of high value forest products such as timber, or to actively encourage this, so that forestry becomes a motor for national growth?

- *Geographical and administrative coverage:*

Is community forestry to be developed so as to restrict the geographical areas in which communities have an interest in forest management or to enlarge them? Will community forestry be confined

to a minor sub-section of the forestry sector, or will it be developed as part of a wider programme of governance reform?

These are fundamental dimensions of an effective policy, and they need to be resolved in advance of the launch of any community forestry projects or programmes. This is particularly the case where the initiatives are to be managed as 'pilot zones' in the geographical and administrative sense (as appears to be the case with the proposed USAID project). Pilot projects are a very weak vehicle for addressing the fundamentals of effective national policy, and indeed could well end up functioning as a diversion to avoid addressing them at all.

5.2 The entry points

If the Government of Liberia is to realise its intention to use the forest sector as a means of reforming governance and alleviating poverty, then a concept of community involvement in forest management is required that goes beyond the notion of the 'community forestry project' in the conventional terms of small scale timber transformation, small-scale NTFP transformation and marketing, and wildlife conservation. It needs also to transcend the attitude that the essence of community forestry is to offer minor project benefits, chiefly payments for labour and small extension inputs, in return for stopping communities from doing whatever they were doing before. Livelihoods that have developed over centuries, in the face of exacting environmental constraints, cannot be outlawed by fiat nor designed away by consultants, just because of their alleged imperfections. Equally, restricting community roles to supplicant ones – acceptance or rejection of the minor benefits that come from 'alternative income generating projects' (offered by donors) and/or 'social responsibility agreements' (offered by the loggers) – will not provide communities with the power and authority they need to negotiate effectively with a hard-headed and voracious timber industry.

Assuming the relaunch of the Liberian timber industry does proceed as planned, the main entry points for community involvement are likely to be:

- Community participation in the governance of that industry;
- Community involvement in the management of the revenues derived therefrom.

Once these two reforms have been secured, then communities will be better placed to negotiate effectively with the industry in relation to further benefits, including:

Box Three: Estimates of Land Rental and Stumpage

FDA Regulation 107-07 (Draft of May 2007, 'R' below) on forest fees lays down the norms for land tax and stumpage, as below. Additional information on projected production and revenue levels is taken from the *Report of the Working Group on PAN*, 2006, Ch.9 ['W']. All figures in US \$.

1. Land rental is set at an annual area fee of US\$1.25 for every hectare of land subject to a Forest Management Contract (i.e concession). Land rental would appear to apply to the whole area of a concession. [R]
2. The total area available for Forest Management Contracts, as of 2011, is estimated in the present FDA strategy to be 2,300,000 ha, together with 36,000 ha. for Timber Sales Contracts. [W]
3. Stumpage is calculated on the basis of the volume and value of the individual tree being felled, and is set at 10% of the market FOB price for category A (high value) species, 5% for category B species, and 2.5% for category C species.¹ [R]
4. The projected economic performance of the sector indicates log production at 858,000 m³ per year, leading to annual tax revenue (land rental and stumpage), nationally, of \$2,902,000 and \$9,582,100, respectively. With a 40 year felling cycle, this suggests log production at c. 15 m³ per hectare of coupe. [W]
5. Assuming (say) a concession area of 100,000 hectares in the locality of a rural population, and an average harvest level of category A species of 15 m³ per hectare, at an average \$100 per m³ (this is in line with [W]), then the annual tax accruing would be:
 - a. Land rental = \$125,000
 - b. Stumpage = \$475,000
6. Thus, if the riparian population receives only the land rental (as per the 2006 law), the sum received would be \$37,500 per 100,000 ha (i.e. 30% of \$125,000). If, however, the community share was 30% of both land rental and stumpage, the total annual community component from this single concession would be (\$37,500 + \$142,500) = US\$180,000.
7. A lower harvest level is perhaps more realistic, given the variable productivity of the forest (say, one third of the projected harvest, at 5 m³ per hectare). This would give annual taxes accruing to this 100,000 ha. concession as:
 - a. Land rental = \$125,000
 - b. Stumpage = \$125,000Thus, on this (hypothetical) scenario, the community share of the land rental would be \$37,500. If stumpage was also attributed at 30%, this would contribute a further \$37,500.

1. Category A covers 27 of the 65 species listed in the draft regulation, including the familiar timber species.

- Community involvement in timber transformation and marketing.
- Community involvement in wildlife and NTFP management, and in conservation planning and implementation.

While the proposed allocations of the land rental to the neighbouring communities and Counties is certainly to be encouraged, the delivery mechanism on offer is highly discretionary and unlikely to contribute to meaningful social change. It is likely to support community empowerment only in the most tokenistic sense, functioning more like a development-oriented charity than a component of real governance reform.

The fact that forest dwelling communities will receive none of the stumpage underlines the very limited

ambition of the fiscal measures. Stumpage is a key component of revenue, for a number of reasons:

- It is likely to be at least as great as the land rental tax in financial terms, possibly considerably more (see Box Three);
- It derives from activities with immediate implications for the environment and sustainability; its fate will be critical to the evolution of the agricultural economy in favour of tree and timber conservation;
- The failure to bring the stumpage into a revenue sharing arrangement can only increase the tendency to view forest rents as a political milch cow, strengthening the alliance between the central government and the industry to the detriment of the rural populations.

Box Four: Reduced Emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD)

International negotiations are presently under way which are likely to lead to the establishment of viable financial mechanisms for *avoided deforestation* –now described in global policy circles as REDD (see, for example, Working Group on Liberia’s PAN, 2006). If accepted within the second implementation period of the Kyoto Protocol within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), REDD would offer the prospect of substantial capital flows to both central government and the rural areas, possibly in excess (perhaps significantly in excess) of what is presently gained by them from timber exploitation.

Agreement was reached at the UNFCCC CoP 13 in Bali to address forest conservation in future discussions on a new global warming treaty with a view to such inclusion.

REDD is of interest in its own terms, as a way of compensating states for the lack of extractive industry and communities for their role in forest management. But it also creates other grounds for communities to become involved in forest management. The core argument here is as follows:

- Hitherto, international financial markets have been only peripherally interested in tropical forests. Their occurrence in low governance contexts has been considered high risk by most investors, and investments have thus been limited to timber extraction, often by private companies, unquoted on financial markets. The reputational risks involved in timber extraction from old growth forests have further reduced the international interest.
- Under the impetus of international climate policy, this situation is likely to change, and to change dramatically. Movements such as REDD offer the prospect of significant new revenue streams deriving from forest conservation. Should climate change be as bad as many predict over the next century, then the potential value of conserved forests could increase geometrically.
- This is leading to growing speculative interest in the future value of forests. Financial markets are increasingly interested in the potential of forest bonds and other forms of forward selling to offer immediate cash returns to producer countries in return for rights over the long term value of forests.
- For a cash-strapped government such as that of present-day Liberia, this could well prove very attractive. It would however be a very high risk strategy, not just for the investor but also for the government and society. For the government, the major problems would be that (a) the future value of forests is difficult to predict (and could be severely underestimated); and (b) though the transfer would no doubt be couched in terms other than ‘ownership’, it would effectively amount to a loss of national sovereignty. For the society – particularly forest dependent populations – the danger would be of a massive loss of access and use rights and claims over future revenues, in order to assure the investor of the security of its own investments.
- In such a situation, it would be imperative for communities to be fully involved in forest governance – both to ensure that any such decision to surrender long-term rights is a product of prior, informed consent (the concept of ‘free, prior and informed consent’), and also to ensure that such lands – if surrendered – are managed in a way that not only secures the contract agreed by the state, but also guarantee the rights of those dependent on day-to-day access to them.

The exact terms of any future inclusion of REDD in the international regime, post-2012, are uncertain. As of now, it seems unlikely that non-additional measures, such as financing of already planned protected area development, would be a priority; the emphasis is more likely to be on areas under imminent threat of deforestation rather than accounting for the total standing volume of conserved carbon. However, the launch of UNFCCC negotiations is likely also to encourage promotion of REDD within voluntary schemes of a quasi-market and/or aid transfer type, and these could offer more scope for a projectized approach. Liberia is likely to be a particular focus of attention for such voluntary schemes. Thus, while future avoided deforestation policy is still to be resolved, there are strong grounds for Liberia to attempt to bring the issue into its strategy for forest governance reform.



Finding gainful employment for rural youth is a key to securing the peace in Liberia

If the aim of the Forestry Policy is really to reform governance and reinforce democracy, then communities need to derive benefits from forest revenue, and to do so on the basis of a responsible role in land and forest management. Forest revenues could play an important part in helping Liberia to provide decent social services to its citizenry, thereby achieving the MDGs. Ensuring that communities have a voice in the management of the timber industry, and that a significant proportion of the forest taxes reaches them in a transparent and accountable way, would contribute both to the welfare of rural communities and to the economic development of the nation. These are among the stated purposes of the Forestry Policy.⁶

5.3 Community involvement in timber cutting and transformation

An alternative approach would be to concentrate initial efforts on community involvement in timber cutting and transformation, either by ensuring that industrial producers use local labour or by developing autonomous community-level enterprise. The latter would have much to recommend it from the perspective of post-war restitution and the integration of ex-combatants. It would also offer potentially lucrative employment opportunities to young adult

males who might otherwise be difficult to re-incorporate into the local economy.

Such employment opportunities are important and should certainly be promoted. The point at stake is not whether they should be offered, but rather how they should relate to the wider governance reforms. The contention here is that, for a number of reasons, they should be considered as contingent on the local governance reforms and not a substitute for them. The arguments in favour of this position are two-fold:

- i. Without a more substantial reform of forest governance, there is a real risk of tokenism, with the industry doing the absolute minimum to comply with the letter (though not necessarily the spirit) of its agreements; this has been the case with many social responsibility agreements in the past.
- ii. Community-level involvement in timber cutting and transformation needs to be locality-based. Allowing itinerant groups of youths to circulate in the rural areas (as happens with mineral prospecting) is uncondusive to social cohesion and sustainable forest management. Once resources are plundered in one area, timber-cutters are able to move on to others without regard to the long-term consequences of their actions. It is thus essential that such cutters are brought within

community management and control structures, in localities where they and their families have long-term interests in the proper management of their environment and its resources.



Election of a new town chief in a Liberian village

5.4 Wider governance considerations – the issue of avoided deforestation

Linking community involvement in the control of the forest industry to local government reform would not only fit in logically with the proposals for the new Community Rights Law, and also strengthen its application (Alden Wily, 2007), but would also reposition the communities to play a positive role in the future developments in the sector, relating to international policy initiatives in areas such as climate change and avoided deforestation (see Box Four). It seems very likely that tropical forestry is on the cusp of some major policy initiatives, which could have major implications for its development.

5.5 Institutionalising the strategy

In institutional terms, Liberia is exceptionally well placed to implement the types of changes described above. As earlier noted, rural Liberia is unique in West African terms, in relation to

- i. The relative homogeneity of local communities.
- ii. The strength of local government at district level, and the extent to which this reinforces and builds on community identities.

- iii. The integration with the state administration (at least at district level).
- iv. The representative functions of chieftaincies (a clear contrast with elsewhere in West Africa); there are checks and balances within the chieftaincy system, even where (as in the south-east) the notion of chieftaincy is of fairly recent origin⁷.
- v. The clarity and stability of community boundaries.
- vi. The existence of strong and legitimate traditional systems for the allocation of resource rights, and established mechanisms for reconciling any conflicts over them.

With regard to the management of local revenue shares, all the evidence points to the value of:

- a. Reinforcing the existing systems of collective community control over local resources, including farm, forest and fallow lands.
- b. Avoiding the possibility of competing legal definitions of ‘community’ rooted in the interests of elite groups and of expatriates of local origin.
- c. Allowing for controls over community-based forest management, and grounding these in the established administrative system which links indigenous authorities and the state.

The actual configuration would have to be determined situationally, in line with each particular social and geographical context. This is a principle of universal applicability in relation to community forestry, but particularly so in rural Liberia, where social structure is unusually egalitarian. The key building block is the ‘tribe’.

Tribe and community in Liberia

The word ‘tribe’ has several levels of meaning in Liberia, with numerous, mostly positive, connotations. By and large, the ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ identities which are most familiar to outsiders and which they would tend to consider as the operative ones (for example, ‘Bassa’, ‘Krahn’, ‘Grebo’, etc.) have little meaning beyond the descriptively geographical, and do not relate to any permanent social institutions; they harbour no institutional memory and would have little sanctioning authority particularly as regards land and natural resource management. This level has an ambiguity which apparent terminological precision and recent social history both belie.

There are, however, local variations. Some tribal units do have a relatively clear boundary, and while

they would not serve as the core social entity, might be invoked to support it. The role played by pan-local institutions of social control is a factor here (for example, secret societies such the 'Poro' and 'Sande' in the north-west). In other cases, this highest tribal level had very little meaning indeed until recently, but has taken on new dimensions in the last few years. A good example is 'Krahn', which until the early 1980s was only a very casual geographical identifier for people from upper Grand Gedeh County.⁸ Since then, the designation has developed much wider connotations. For example, it is often claimed that there is a Krahn culture as well as a Krahn language (although in fact the origins of the peoples and languages spoken in the Krahn area are quite diverse, and some of the languages are not mutually intelligible; the forces that has generated and coalesced Krahn identity can be mainly dated to post 1980, and derive their meanings from very recent political history, not 'traditional culture').

Whatever the value of this highest tribal level, the more active levels of social identity are universally below it, though again, there are some important regional differences.⁹ In the South East, for example (that is the areas broadly identified as 'Krahn', 'Sapo', 'Kru' and 'Grebo'), it is the 'tribal' level immediately below which provides the most powerful sense of identity, and which defines a community with real practical relevance. This is the traditional land-holding unit and tends to be coterminous with an important linguistic boundary (distinctive tribal language, or at the very least, a well-defined and distinctive local dialect). It is associated with traditional authorities, though the exact level of these ('paramount' or 'clan' or 'town' chieftaincy) depends on local circumstances (size of grouping, and its history of relations with the central government, with a strong element of historical bargaining with the state around administrative and traditional offices as well).¹⁰ The tribal entities in question tend to be found at sub-district level, in the state administrative system and to bring together a numerically manageable community (c. 1,000 – 5,000 persons). Interestingly, some of these units are already organising themselves to demand a role in forest management, sometimes at the suggestion of national politicians.

Elsewhere, the situation is more variable. In some cases (e.g. 'Kpelle', 'Loma'), the language unit may be too big to have strong community associations (demarcating a community in the tens of thousands), in which case the relevant collectivity may be at administrative (clan or town) level. In yet other instances (e.g. the 'Bassa' area), the towns are typically too small (they would be called 'villages' in

most countries in the sub-region), in which case the clan may refer to a social as well as administrative unit, with associations with landholding, closer to the south-eastern cases.

While it is clear is that there are community level institutions that might effectively manage land and tree resources, there are no off-the-shelf prescriptions. Additional field research would be needed to identify the relevant local units with precision in each local context.

Whatever the applicable institution in any particular instance, it will be essential to ensure that this:

1. is well-grounded in indigenous institutions
2. supports legitimate historical claims and patterns of resource use at community level
3. reflects and consolidates established and currently workable systems of indigenous control over land and other natural resources
4. is underpinned by long-term local residence (normally manifest in fluency in the local language)
5. has the critical mass to negotiate successfully with outside interests.

The arguments in favour of these proposals are several:

- a. Categories that are easily marginalised (for example, young adult males, all age classes of women) are already represented in viable rural institutions in most areas.
- b. Wealth differences are pronounced between rural and non-rural dwellers, and between expatriate and resident elites; there would thus be a risk of expatriates using their community origins to capture local resources on a large scale to no local benefit.
- c. An alternative, purely 'residence-oriented', approach (for example, locating the operative management body only at the level of the large towns) would have no basis in stable social identities; residents of the larger towns tend to have diverse social origins associated with temporary employment, and those from outside the locality usually claim land ownership in their natal areas, not the site of their present residence.
- d. Relying only on a less formal system for community involvement in forest management (for example, like-minded individuals with no necessary common origins or residence organised into community forestry groups) would seem unwise

in political terms; such groups would have no legitimate basis on which to negotiate with the logging industry and, as noted in Section 5.3, would be difficult for local authorities to control; recent experience warns of the dangers of such itinerant groups controlling valuable natural resources but lacking any commitment to sustainable management.

- e. The concentration of regulatory and legal institutions in the urban centres (away from most rural areas), and the major differences in levels of literacy between urban and local areas, increase the need to protect the primacy of the local and rural.
- f. The local communities are the main repositories of information about land, tree and other property claims; there are strong grounds for empowering this level rather than surrendering authority and knowledge to outside, mainly written, repositories (which would risk distortions and misrepresentation with no local checks and balances).

In relation to the national land classification, the local situation would depend on the land classes which exist in the vicinity. Thus:

- a. Where there are National Forests in a particular area, then communities neighbouring or straddling those forests would have a significant role in their co-management along with the national authorities; the main issue to resolve here would be the nature of community rights in the forests, other than co-management with industrial loggers; where these rights cover wildlife, then there may be a need for inter-community coordination over straddling stocks.
- b. Where there are other land classes in a particular area (for example, a national park), then the riparian communities would likewise have a role in their co-management, in line with, and in support

of, the provisions of the national legislation, and with due regard to the legitimate local interest; as noted by Alden Wily (2007), there are no reasons why communities should not be directly involved in protected area management – and indeed, good reasons to argue that they should.

The exact nature of the co-management rights would depend on national negotiations (it is understood that the proposed Lands Commission will be revisiting the public/private/tribal classification). The national census that is currently being undertaken (March 2008) is also relevant (LISGIS). There would need to be appropriate forms of coordination at district and county levels. The aim would be to ensure that local communities have meaningful roles in the management of natural resources over which they have pre-existing claims, and in line with the provisions of the law. The communities would, in effect, be custodians of those lands on behalf of the public interest.

The arguments habitually used to oppose such sharing of authority include the need to maintain business confidence and lower investor risk. However, Liberian experience would suggest that both of these are likely to be much better addressed by involving communities in land allocation decisions than by attempting to exclude them. Without such involvement, the risk to investors is likely to be higher not lower, as the history of the rubber sector shows. Communities are aware of the employment needs of their younger members, and are most unlikely to reject such investment opportunities provided they are properly consulted, and provided also that they can spare the land required and judge the benefits to be real. What is required for investors to have confidence in their leaseholds is that the neighbouring communities are satisfied that the land was fairly allocated, after a proper process of consultation and on the basis of free, prior and informed consent (ILO, 2005)

6. Concluding remarks

The idea of 'community forestry' is now well implanted into thinking on forestry in Liberia, and is one of the three pillars of the present strategy of '3Cs' – commercial, conservation and community'. However, this division warns of the danger that community involvement in forest management might be compartmentalised and marginalised as the least important and least valued aspect of the strategy. This danger is only increased, albeit inadvertently, by the present international preoccupation with the need to put the forest industry back onto a sound footing in relation to timber trade. Important as this movement is, it must not be used as an excuse to downgrade the community interest to the level of minor forest products and non-commercial interests. The present Strategy is ambiguous, but such a

marginalisation is certainly one possible outcome.

A more radical approach would seem all too urgent given the recent history of Liberia, and the absolute necessity of ensuring that the forest sector does not contribute once again to the downward spiral of bad governance and lawlessness which almost destroyed the country in the last two decades, and visited untold miseries on its population. More encouragingly, Liberia has an exceptional potential for a more progressive and healthy development of the forest sector, such as does not readily exist elsewhere in the West African sub-region. Community forestry – and community involvement in forest management in a broader sense – are well placed to contribute very substantially to this process of change.

Endnotes

- 1 Draft Paper of the Working Group on Liberia's Protected Area Network.
- 2 The 2006 Law states: 'In addition to satisfying the other requirements of this Section, the Authority shall, within one year of the effective date of this Law, present to the Legislature for consideration and passage a comprehensive law governing community rights with respect to forest land.' (Section 10.1.c)
- 3 This analysis of Richards and his colleagues is a highly controversial one in numerous ways, not just as regards the alleged role of land pressure and lack of access to land but also (and more critically) its interpretation of the dynamics of chieftaincy, male-female relations, and cultural practices in general. The present author would challenge this analysis in fundamental respects.
- 4 Gold and diamonds likewise have high value to weight ratios, and are easily transportable, thus adding to their attractiveness as economic activities. Alluvial 'placer' gold is reported to be found in high densities in many areas of Liberia, with up to six times the normal frequency for gold-rich areas of the tropics (although the source 'lodes' of gold have not yet been found in Liberia).
- 5 A subsidiary consideration in relation to the extent of the changes sought through community forestry activities is the level of probable investment by the development assistance donors, and hence, the need to ensure impacts commensurate with the funds involved. For example, USAID has recently issued a call for tender for a 'Land Rights And Community Forestry Program (LRCFP)' with an initial envelope of US\$5.2-5.8 million over two years, with an estimated budget of a further US\$2.5 million for year three; a substantial programme is evidently on the cards.
- 6 Of course, the proper use of the proportions of the forest taxes that accrue to central government and the regions is equally important. There are various options (ranging from accrual to general state revenues to retention by the FDA). A balance needs to be struck between general welfare, and benefits targeted on the rural areas (for example, a hypothesized forest development fund). Given the problem of high rural-urban migration, the latter has much to recommend it.
- 7 Chieftaincies did not exist in most areas of the east of the country until the establishment of (Americo-Liberian) rule from Monrovia, in the early years of the twentieth century. There had, however, long been powerful individual patrons who derived their power and authority from their accumulated wealth and control of marriage, and these had quasi chieftaincy functions (see Brown 1984).
- 8 For example, people from 'Putu' south-east of Zwedru in Grand Gedeh County (known to themselves as *Pu wulu panyɔ̄*, which also identifies their language) would be identified as 'Krahn' when working in the enclave economy, as their own self-designation would be too fine-grained for external interaction. Until the 1980s, however, one would rarely hear this designation used as a serious tribal marker in their own locality. There are often major differences between what rural Liberians call themselves and what outsiders believe them to be. However, there are also significant local variations. Thus, dialect differences are quite small in some areas (for example, between dialects of Loma), much greater in others (for example, some dialects of 'Krahn').
- 9 I am grateful to Prof. Jeannette Carter of the University of Liberia for detailed guidance on Section 5.5.
- 10 Care is required when using terms such as 'chiefdom' and 'clan' in the Liberian context. These are basically administrative units defined on a geographical basis, and have their origins in the 'hinterland' administrative system created by the GoL in the early 20th Century. Thus, they are not necessarily kin-based units. However, many do overlap with (and are quite often co-terminous with) indigenous kin-based groups, particularly at the clan level.

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