

Urban Agriculture in and around Monrovia, Liberia

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Since the end of the war that raged from 1989 to 2003, Liberia has suffered from chronic food insecurity, due to the destruction of its agricultural sector and basic socio-economic infrastructure. Urban agriculture provides a strategy to help reduce urban poverty, improve food security and enhance urban waste management in Monrovia and other Liberian cities. Recently the government acknowledged the importance of urban agriculture in enhancing food security in the country.

Agriculture has always been the key to food security in both urban and rural areas of Liberia. Before the conflict, approximately 80 percent of the people of Liberia derived their livelihoods from farming alone. After the civil war and decades of predatory regimes, Liberia today is one of the most food-insecure countries in the world, with one third of the population undernourished and over 75 percent living below the universally established poverty line of 1 USD per day. It is ranked as one of the lowest countries in the UNDP Human Development Report, which covers various sector including employment, income, health, education, gender equality and child welfare (UNDP, 2007). The interim Poverty Reduction Strategy of Liberia (2007) highlights agriculture as one of the major economic sectors that has the potential to resuscitate the economy and create significant job opportunities that could make an impact in addressing the high unemployment.

Agriculture has always been important in urban areas of Liberia

Monrovia

The preliminary results of the 2008 national population and housing census in Liberia reveal that over one third of the 3.49 million inhabitants of the country live in Greater Monrovia, but many in Liberia believe the percentage may be closer to 40-50 percent.

The urban population in Liberia is growing quickly as the economy slowly recovers from the disastrous effects of the 15 years of war. The capital, Monrovia, is host to an estimated 45 percent of the more than one hundred thousand rebel fight-



Many Monrovia citizens are now growing their own food
Photo: VOSIED

ers who were demobilised in Liberia and a huge population of war-affected people including IDPs, repatriates and rural families who migrated to Monrovia in order to escape poverty. Many of these migrants were farmers before coming to Monrovia, but lack the basic skills necessary to secure employment in other sectors. The education gap experienced by most Liberian youths has also created a significant dearth of skilled workers in most sectors. Young adults are not attracted to the low income generated in agriculture, which cannot compete with unskilled labour wages offered, for example, in mining. Their marginal status and lack of prospects also undermine social cohesion, stability and economic growth, especially in already fragile situations as experienced in Liberia.

According to the Greater Monrovia Food and Nutrition Survey (Republic of Liberia, 2007), 14 percent of households in Greater Monrovia are food insecure and 16 percent are vulnerable to food insecurity. This urban population is highly vulnerable to economic shocks, especially the food crisis that has directly impacted food prices. The consumer price index increased 14 percent between January 2007 and January 2008, and the cost of a typical food basket increased by 25 percent over that period. Given that half of the urban population's income is spent on food (GoL, 2008), the situation of the poorest urban families has seriously deteriorated. As a consequence, the most disadvantaged households are severely restricted in their intake of proteins and vegetables, which leads to decreased dietary diversity and increased malnutrition, especially among children under five.

Urban agriculture has the potential to alleviate urban food insecurity and support poverty reduction by offering employment and skills building, while also tackling the problem of waste management.

Agriculture in Monrovia and other cities

Most vegetables and fruits currently sold in markets and supermarkets in Monrovia and other Liberian cities are imported at very high prices from Guinea, Ivory Coast, Lebanon or China. Rice and cassava are the main staple food crops in Liberia, and more than 60 percent of the rice consumed in Liberia is imported (WFP, 2008). But in and around Monrovia families are increasing their own food production as a way to provide their families with fresh and nutritious food, while a minority sells their produce on the market.

Many people, including IDPs, repatriates and rural families migrated to Monrovia

In backyards and small plots on open spaces, families grow vegetables (sweet potato, cabbage, amaranth, okra, pepper, eggplant, cassava, or corn), and some fruit (mango, papaya) or medicinal plants. Some households have access to two plots: one near the house for the rainy season and one on the edge of nearby swamps for the dry season. These home-gardens and small plots are mostly cultivated by women.

Constraints

Urban agriculture is not new in Liberia. It was practiced for decades in Monrovia and other Liberian cities before the civil war broke out in 1989, but grew in importance during and after the conflict.

Although many Monrovia citizens are now growing their own food and the government is positive about urban agriculture, there is little or no awareness of its importance among the governmental institutions. Urban agriculture is not yet high on the agenda at municipal level or within the Ministry of Agriculture. There are no policies that promote urban agriculture, especially regarding land tenure issues.

The challenges to sustainable urban agriculture in Liberia include limited farm/garden management skills, a lack of

Families grow vegetables in backyards and small plots on open spaces
Photo: VOSIED



There is a need to raise awareness on the importance of urban agriculture in Liberia

Photo: VOSIED

access to inputs (including financial services) and agricultural extension services, limited marketing and food processing skills, and contamination of crops with pathogens (mainly due to irrigation with polluted water or unhygienic marketing practices).

What could be done

For urban agriculture to develop its full potential and contribute to sustainable urban development, it is important that this potential be recognised by the urban authorities, Monrovia City Corporation, the Ministry of Agriculture, the National Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), researchers, NGOs, universities, and the major donor agencies. There is first a need to raise awareness among stakeholders and policy makers on the importance of urban agriculture in Liberia. Support to urban producers and micro-retailers is further necessary, and training should prioritise sustainable and profitable agricultural practices, the development of value chains and the establishment of city-based farmers' networks. Subsequently, the major support institutions need to strengthen their provision of technical assistance.

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