

Key Statistics

- 68% of Liberia's rural population and 55% of the urban population, live on less than US\$1 a day.
- In 2006, 11% of all households in Liberia were completely food insecure, while 40% of rural households were considered 'highly vulnerable' to food insecurity.



General Information

Liberia is in West Africa and has a population of approximately 3,476,000 people. Liberia's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, became the first elected female head of state in Africa in 2005 and has pledged, among other things, to improve the status of women in Liberia.

Liberia was founded during the nineteenth century by the union of two private American colonies comprised of freed slaves. The constitution was based on that of the USA and English remains its official language.

Between 1989 and 2003 Liberia experienced a devastating civil war, which displaced 86% of households and significantly damaged basic infrastructure, particularly education and health services and economic systems. The civil war exacerbated already poor living and economic conditions in Liberia and has severely hindered any progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The United Nations remain in Liberia as a peace keeping force, helping to re-establish political, economic and social stability.

Liberia's economy

Liberia's economy is a free-enterprise, market system. Agriculture is the main source of income for the state, accounting for 58% of Liberia's GDP in 2003. However, Liberia is still significantly reliant on food, particularly rice, imports for consumption. Liberia is far from food secure and continues to suffer from the long term food crisis.

36% of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The crops Liberia produces are primarily rice, cassava, bananas and vegetables. Agricultural production levels have increased since the end of the war but are, in some cases, still not at the level they were before the war. This indicates the level of destruction to infrastructure and property that the war caused and the reason for the severe food crisis Liberia faces.

Access to markets, land and seeds and improvements in infrastructure are necessary in order to improve Liberia's food security crisis and make its economy competitive in world markets. Infrastructure initiatives are currently being developed by the World Bank, which is investing over US\$126 million in Liberia. These projects range from good governance and economic policies to the reconstruction of local communities, which is necessary for Liberia's post-war recovery.

Cassava

Cassava is the developing world's fourth most important crop. Resembling a sweet potato, the roots are high in carbohydrates and the leaves provide about the same amount of protein as an egg. It can be used to make flour, gum, animal feed, starch and paper. It can also be fermented to make farina (gari), a granulated product, which can last several months, cassava chips and fufu, all of which are usually sold at markets.

Cassava is an important crop for Africa because of its ability to be grown easily and not be affected by drought. Unlike rice, it can be harvested in the rainy season, when hunger levels are at their highest in Liberia. It grows well in poorer soils and does not require much fertiliser as its leaves fall, providing its own organic fertiliser. This also makes it less vulnerable to fluctuating fuel prices.

In an average year a farmer harvests about 2 tonnes of maize per hectare. A cassava crop, on the other hand, will produce 3 times as much food. Scientists are currently producing new strains of cassava which are more resistant to local pests, drought and which can be harvested quicker. It is important that farmers, globally, have access to these new seeds in order to produce enough food for their families and to provide a reasonable income.

Climate change in Liberia

Liberia's agricultural sector will be seriously threatened by climate change, according to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at the opening of the 2009 Consultation on Climate Change, Human Rights, Peace and Security in Monrovia. Climate change, particularly rising temperatures, will also significantly impact livestock production and the availability of water throughout Africa. The Consultation will discuss methods of combating climate change within Liberia and establish education programs for farmers about repercussions of climate change.

Liberia is already experiencing the erosion of its coastline, which is home to over 50% of the population. This may well result in the displacement of a significant proportion of the population, which could ignite more political unrest. The Natural Disaster Relief Commission is also being re-established to provide education to citizens regarding emergency procedures during disasters. As the global temperature rises, an increased number of natural disasters and irregular weather patterns are expected and will have harmful consequences on agricultural production.

The Consultation will also discuss the ways in which to educate Liberia's population on the causes of climate change and what they can do to prevent it. Some current farming practices are producing considerable amounts of carbon dioxide. For example, farmers regularly burn large areas of grasslands in order to remove crop stubble and revitalise the soil. The timber industry, which is a vital source of income in Liberia, is also contributing to emissions.

Liberia and the MDGs

The civil war set back any achievements made before 1989 to eradicate poverty in Liberia. At this stage there is only a very weak chance that Liberia will achieve the majority of the MDGs.

Since the end of the war, Liberia's situation has hardly improved. For example, in 2001, 76.2% of the population lived on less than US\$1 a day. In 2007 this figure had significantly increased to 83.7% of the population and it is likely that with the recent food and financial crises this figure would not have decreased.

Liberia's food crisis and the civil war have also resulted in rising maternal mortality rates and decreasing education enrolment rates, particularly for girls. In 1990 there were 560 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births and in 2005 the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated there were 1200. The 2015 target is 65 deaths per 100,000 live births and it is unlikely that Liberia will achieve this. This is

directly linked to the rise in poverty and hunger during the war, as well as the destruction of infrastructure, primarily access to adequate health care during this period.

Despite the food-for-education initiative, primary education enrolment rates have not improved significantly, probably due to the recent global crises. This is a World Food Programme and UNICEF initiative which involves hot food rations for students during recess periods, take home rations for female students in grades 4-6 who achieve an attendance record of 80% of a calendar month and basic health education for students. During the 2001 to 2002 period Liberia's net enrolment ratio in primary education was 34.7%, while in 2007 it was 37.3%. The ratio of girls has increased significantly, from 14.5% in 2002 to 37.1% in 2007. This will, in time, have a positive impact on other MDG indicators, particularly maternal mortality rates.

Liberia's election of a female president is a very positive sign in the promotion of women's empowerment within the country and Africa. Between 1997 and 2006 the number of women in parliament more than doubled from 5.7% to 14%. The education of women will lead to a further increase in this statistic and will also support the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Useful links

<http://www.republicofliberia.org/Inglese/index.htm>

<http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmil/>

<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/>

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