The first COVID-19 case in Liberia was confirmed on 16 March 2020. A week later, authorities declared a public health emergency. COVID-19 cases alarmingly increased from June to July which surpassed the previous months’ caseloads. As of 31 July 2020, 73 deaths are confirmed in a country which ranks 176 out of 189 in the Human Development Index. Liberia is a fragile state and its economy never fully recovered from the effects of 2014 Ebola outbreak and two long civil wars (1989-2003), which destroyed not only people’s lives but also vital infrastructure, electricity lines, roads, water and sewage systems.

As of June 2020, the World Bank is projecting Liberia’s GDP to contract by 2.2 percent in 2020 before recovering to 4.1 percent in 2022. Poor basic services and weak infrastructure lead to high transport costs that hinder agricultural competitiveness and distribution and make Liberia dependent on importing food. Then there are the COVID-19 crisis and movement restrictions as well as trade disruptions, which are expected to increase food insecurity over the next 18 months.

**COVID-19 and the Oil Palm Supply Chain**

There are similarities between the current COVID-19 situation and the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), labour shortages and disruptions in agricultural supply chains meant that many farmers in Liberia could not grow or sell their crops. The little that they could plant was impossible to sell in a situation with restricted movements.
and closed markets. Shortages of goods lead to higher commodity prices and lower incomes, which ultimately means that people have no financial resources and no access to food.

The consequences of COVID-19 are also felt by the oil palm communities. Support to producers is difficult, as villages are isolated and cut off from roads and bridges, especially during the rainy season from May to October. Access to reliable information sources becomes also extremely difficult, hampered by limited connectivity. The smallholders and the population of Liberia in general feel therefore a big disconnect to the current situation. Although there are clear differences between Ebola and COVID-19, similar issues such as fear, stigmatization of infected people and mistrust towards public health institutions evolve in the oil palm communities.

Key COVID-19 support measures in Liberia

Liberia had developed its National Preparedness and Response Plan already in February 2020. The President of Liberia announced additional stringent prevention measures including limiting internal travel and public gatherings, enforcing physical distancing, and hand promoting hygiene protocols. The country has ended the National Health Emergency on 21 July 2020. The Ministry of Health presented the Revised COVID-19 Declaration of National Health Emergency on 23 July 2020, which in addition to public health laws and protocols has established capacity limits for banks, supermarkets and public transportation.

The Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) led a COVID-19 response plan and worked through a shovel-ready structure for the nationwide implementation of this plan to deliver support to agricultural livelihoods. This allowed its Response programme to disburse high quality outputs and timely results. The plan’s utilization into existing projects, interventions and accompanying structures to upstream implementation and results delivery is highly applauded.

The World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund have called for a “bilateral debt standstill”, as part of the global response to soften the impact of COVID-19 on Africa’s poor. Liberia has received external funds for the country’s recovery efforts of around US$152 million from the World Bank, the European Union and the African Development Bank (AfDB). The World Bank money (half grant / half loan) is aimed at supporting a series of pro-poor reforms in Liberia, aiming at sustainable and inclusive economic growth by strengthening public-sector transparency and promoting economic and social inclusion. The European Union is investing in rural electrification and technical and vocational training for young people, and the AfDB grant is not earmarked. On July 17 2020, Liberia’s President George Weah warned that emerging and existing challenges, poor public sector delivery and the severe impact of COVID-19 could undermine the successful implementation of the country’s Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development, the national development plan for long term poverty reduction.

Within the composition of the Country’s Public Sector Investment Projects, US$1.6 million will go to the agriculture sector, focusing on rice development and support to smallholder farmers, while the biggest chunk of the budget of almost US$30 million is earmarked to improve infrastructure and basic services with a focus on road construction, maintenance of bridges and street lighting.

How the Good Growth Partnership can support a resilient, sustainable and green recovery in Liberia

The Good Growth Partnership with other institutions can pave the way to ultimately building a more resilient, sustainable and green future. In the emerging risk of increased deforestation for short term economic gains, this pathway must include the protection of important forest landscapes through investments in sustainable supply chains.

Responding to emergency needs. Good Growth partners are currently responding to the COVID-19 crisis in Liberia by supporting communities with medical supplies, and by conducting awareness sessions, which help in reporting infections to health facilities, building trust and decreasing stigmatization of infected people. The sensitization activities include explanations of the root causes for zoonotic diseases, underlining the links between forests and COVID-19. The key message is that the more forests are destroyed, humans are more likely to get sick because they get too close to natural ecosystems and risk that diseases can jump from animals to humans.
Finalising the legally binding National Oil Palm Strategy and Action Plan. The plan is an outcome of the partnership's technical support to the National Oil Palm Platform of Liberia (NOPPOL) and will guide the sustainable growth in the sector as a driver of economic recovery. Good Growth partners facilitate participation of local communities and farmers, alongside other key actors of the supply chain, with the aim of enhancing their voice and business opportunities. The partnership also creates space for a stronger private sector engagement in Liberia's recovery and poverty reduction plan through improved accountability, focusing on the well-being and inclusiveness of producers in the oil palm supply chain.

Facilitating international certification schemes on a national level. The Good Growth Partnership was instrumental in the facilitation of a multi-stakeholder dialogue that resulted in the Liberian interpretation of the global principles and criteria used by the internationally recognized Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) in their certification scheme. The RSPO Secretariat approved the draft submission from Liberia which is now back in-country for feedback and buy-in from major public and private actors, civil society, producers and oil palm communities. Having a nationally agreed interpretation of the RSPO for Liberia means that producers have access to markets that require sustainable certification. This is considered as a milestone in the sector development, assuring transparency and credibility throughout the entire oil palm supply chain.

Protecting vulnerable landscapes. The Good Growth Partnership is working on the integration of sustainable community oil palm production with forest conservation through Conservation Agreements, which have improved the resilience of local communities through diversification of livelihoods and social support systems. Also, the partnership ensures that concerns of local communities are represented in decision-making and development planning processes, and that land-use conflicts are addressed when local Conservation Agreements are developed.
Answering gender inequality in socio-economic and political participation in Liberia. The Good Growth Partnership has developed a gender action plan, which is currently implemented. Gender shapes the ability to recover and to strengthen households’ resilience. The partnership supports gender policies by promoting women’s participation in decision-making processes throughout the recovery and reconstruction process. This includes the sensitization of local leaders and male project participants. Good Growth partners also train women to carry out typical “male” functions, for example in forest patrolling, strengthening forest monitoring while promoting gender equality.

Successful multi-stakeholder management in the COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that concerted action is possible and necessary to prevent disasters. The Good Growth Partnership is committed to continue working within its multi-stakeholder collaboration approach in Liberia, linking government, smallholders, civil society, finance institutions and the private sector to reach long-term systemic change.

Read more at: [www.goodgrowthpartnership.com](http://www.goodgrowthpartnership.com)

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