SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CURRENT STATUS OF COFFEE PRODUCTION IN LIBERIA: A BRIEF VISIT REPORT

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I. Introduction

The Inter-African coffee organization (IACO) is an inter-governmental organization of 25 coffee producing African member countries and Liberia is one of the members. One of the major mandates of IACO is to assist its member countries through addressing challenges facing the African coffee industry and instituting measures to ensure increased production, productivity and quality. To this end, IACO has been doing its level best and is currently in the process of coordinating the development of a comprehensive project on Revitalization of African coffee production, quality and trade through the consultancy services of CABI – Africa and financial support of the common fund for commodities (CFC).

To understand the realistic and immediate constraints of coffee production in the member countries, reorientate regional coffee developments projects towards the immediate needs, and facilitate better coordination and monitoring of regional programs, knowledge about the overall situation of coffee in each country is very essential. The fact that the member countries are not on equal footing in coffee production and marketing developments, the realistic problems of coffee production or trade and emerging issues of coffee development program may considerably vary from country to country. Therefore, any regional coffee development project that embraces more than one country should always take in to account these differences and carefully design to properly address the immediate problems in each country involved.

In cognizant of the aforementioned realities, a travel mission was undertaken to Liberia from 23 – 27 February 2009 and the main objectives were: (1) to obtain an overview of the current status of coffee production, major constraints and opportunities available in the country, (2) to discuss with the concerned bodies on the possible ways of revitalizing or promoting coffee
production in the country, (3) to document basic information that could be used as a base in preparing coffee development project that is well focused to mitigating immediate problems and best fit to the local conditions. To achieve these objectives, meetings were held with relevant government bodies such as The Liberian Produce Marketing Corporation (LPMC) and Cooperative Development Agency (CDA), a coffee farm near Gbonduwah town (140 km from Monrovia) in Suakoko District of Bong County was visited and informal discussions were made with different individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in coffee business. The outcome of these discussions is summarized in the following sections.

II. Production Status

Liberia produces both Robusta and Liberica coffees. Currently, Liberica coffee is produced at very limited scale along the Atlantic coastal areas only for local consumption purpose. Long time in the past, it was one of the export coffee species that share 1 – 5% of the world coffee supply. Liberia was the major producer and exporter of this coffee type while limited amount was also produced by Java, Malaysia and the Philippines during that period. Its export was discontinued because of less demand owing to its relatively lower quality and price compared to Robusta and Arabica coffees.

Since the collapse of Liberica coffee export, Robusta was the only type of coffee Liberia is exporting. Robusta is produced in several counties in central and northern part of Liberia. During the prewar period, Liberia used to produce and export as high as 10,000 metric tones and the yield per hectare was 10 – 15 bags (= 800 – 1200 kg of clean coffee per hectare, where 1 = 80kg). Today, after the devastating civil war, the production per hectare has dropped down to 3 – 4 kg bags (= 240 – 320 kg of clean coffee per hectare) and it is hardly possible to export 200 – 400 tons annually. As a consequence of the civil war, the coffee producing families were almost entirely displaced; the coffee farms were neglected or abandoned and changed to forest coffee (Fig 1). Most of the coffee farms in Liberia are of this type and slightly managed coffee is rarely available. The breakdown of quota system and consequent world coffee price crises has also contributed to the neglect of coffee production since the local price was so low and discouraging. Because of this low and discouraging local price, cross-border trade to neighboring countries is high and this has considerably affected the export volume. At present, there is no exclusive government organ responsible for coffee per se. During the prewar era, Liberian Produce Marketing Corporation (LPMC) under the Ministry of Agriculture was the government body responsible for promotion of export trade and provision of all kinds
Fig. 1 Close view of coffee farm changed to forest coffee

Fig. 2: Distant view of the previous coffee farm changed to forest system

of extension services including training, input supply, distribution of planting material, arrangement of credit services and inspection and control of quality at farm gate and export level. This organization has been devastated during the war and currently it is under the process of rehabilitation to put all the broken pieces together and bring back to life or operational. Since poverty rate is very high and their knowhow about coffee management and
processing is highly limited, farmers do not have the capacity and capability to do any rehabilitation and management activity on their own if not assisted by government body such as LPMC. As a result, all the coffee farms have been changed to wild coffee because of neglect for quite long period of time, since the beginning of the civil war in 1991 that ended in late 2003. The forest coffee is now reproducing itself as any other wild plant species and it is not uncommon to see abundant number of spontaneous coffee seedlings and very tall mother trees which does not even allow picking of the cherries.

Because of its high cost and labor intensity to rehabilitate their coffee farm, and because of the establishment of a new rubber processing plant, the farmers and private investors are all intensively and extensively planting rubber trees throughout the country. Cocoa is the second dominant cash crop after rubber grown by the farmers and the production of coffee is generally limited and considerably challenged by these crops. If immediate measures are not taken to reverse the current situation, coffee production in Liberia could face the worst scenario.

The coffee marketing system has not been re-established after the civil war. As a consequence, cross-border trade is very high and effective control of local coffee price is difficult. At the moment, LPMC is doing its level best to set current prices based on world market price information and announce to the producers and traders through various Medias including Television, Radio and newspaper. LPMC is also assisting the exporters on proper sorting, grading and packing of export coffees in order to maintain the reputation of good quality Liberian coffee on the world market. Currently, the private exporters directly collect from the farmers based on the price set by LPMC. Even though there is no as such well established price control mechanism, from our discussion with some exporters at LPMC, the exporters are well aware of the sensitivity and danger of price issue and are willing to pay fair price to the farmers to maintain mutual benefits and sustainability of the coffee business.

III. Coffee Production Constraints

There are multiple factors that contributed to the current low level of coffee production and that impeded future revitalization and promotion of coffee production and marketing. Because of my short visit, it may not be possible to provide exhaustive and long list of these problems, but it is my impression that the following are the major constraints which may need immediate intervention to revamp coffee production in Liberia:
1. Displacement of the coffee producing families and abandonment of coffee farms as a result of civil war – The devastating civil war in Liberia that took place from December 1989 to late 2003 had wiped out all government structures, infrastructure and development sectors. As a result of this war, the coffee sub-sector has been badly damaged. The coffee families were displaced and the coffee farms were abandoned. Because of long years of neglect, the coffee farms have been changed to forest coffee and rehabilitation of these farms may incur considerable initial cost.

2. Low coffee price – Since the break down of quota system in 1989 that destabilized the prices, the price of coffee in Liberia is said to be constantly too low (less than one dollar per kilo) to compensate the expense of the farmers and support their livelihood. The farmers and all those involved in coffee production activity strongly complain about it and were discouraged to produce coffee. Many have neglected their farm and others are cutting it down and planting other crops.

3. Old age of the coffee trees and lack of planting Material – The neglected coffee farms were too old and originally established from traditional varieties that were not tested for their yield potential, quality, and pest resistance. Improved planting materials are lacking for new planting or rehabilitation of the old farms through stumping and refilling.

4. High cost of coffee management and poverty rate – All the individuals involved in coffee production activities witness that coffee management is capital intensive and yet low return particularly when compared to cocoa, rubber and pulm oil. Coffee planting, slashing or weeding (= brushing), picking and dry processing are all laborious activities and costly. On the other hand, poverty rate among the resource poor coffee farmers is high that they cannot do any rehabilitation or management activity on their own unless assisted through certain mechanisms such as subsidy for agricultural inputs and farm tools supply and credit facilities to capacitate the farmers so that they can stand on their own in the long run.

5. Shortage of labor – As a consequence of the civil war, most of the youngsters had migrated to towns. They did not return back to their village and are either in the town or joined some NGOs such as road construction companies or mining areas where they can get immediate cash. The population of Liberia is estimated at 3.5 million and out of this, Monrovia, the capital city, alone is said to constitute about 1.5 million people. Even if the remaining towns altogether constitute about one million, apparently, the rural population engaged in agriculture
will be less than the Urban. Probably, this could be the major reason for shortage of labor in the agricultural sector.

6. Lack of extension system – There is no any extension structure in place that is responsible for training, advisory services, facilitate input supply and credit system, providing planting materials, etc to the farmers.

7. Inadequate or lack of technical knowhow about coffee production, processing and marketing – Farmers do not have adequate knowledge of proper weeding, stumping, pruning, picking and drying. It has been noted that stumping of coffee is just like cutting down of any other tree and the farmers have no any awareness about the use of pruning saw, diagonal cutting, time of stumping, and sucker selection.

8. Competition by other Cash crops – Rubber and cocoa are the most competitive crops that are big threats to coffee promotion. These crops are claimed to be easy to manage and harvest and also fetches high and stable price. In the contrary, coffee management is labor intensive or costly, the price is low and volatile, harvesting is only once a year and annual production is irregular (biennial bearing), particularly when compared to rubber and palm oil where there is continuous harvest and supply of income to the farmers. As a result of this, coffee production is completely dominated by rubber, cocoa and to some extent palm oil.

9. Well established Marketing system is lacking – There is no well established marketing chain and price control system. There are some private cocoa exporters who directly collect from the farmers. Since the local price is low and discouraging, cross-border trade to the neighboring countries is very high. Such practice obviously affects the volume of export and the national foreign exchange revenue considerably.

10. Lack of coffee development projects and inadequate external support – Despite the absolute necessity of coffee rehabilitation program at this initial stage, which may require high initial cost for land clearing, rejuvenation of old coffee and refilling, new planting, multiplication and supply of planting material, etc., there is no single coffee development project intended to mobilize fund from external donors to assist the farmers. There are certain NGOs such as International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Sustainable Tree Crop Program (STCP), World Food Program (WFP), and others who are involved in some capacity building, organizing farmers and extension services with no much effort on coffee development activities. However, it is important to note that the CDA/GFCS farm rehabilitation pilot project on coffee,
cocoa and rubber in Kolahun district using a target group of about 200 farmers is an interesting beginning and must be encouraged to extend the experience to other groups of farmers and districts.

11. Lack of National coffee development plan – At present, there is no national coffee development plan and defined vision and targets that may serve as basis for campaigning in sustainable coffee development activities.

12. Inadequate Infrastructure and coffee processing facilities – Among others, there is no adequate road network that allow access to the main coffee growing areas to provide various extension services to the farmers or access to market by the farmers. Coffee processing facilities like pulping factories, hulling mills and drying facilities like cemented floor or raised beds, which at the present status cannot be owned by the resource poor farmers are generally lacking, even though these are crucial to maintain the standard quality of coffee. Only few private exporters are said to have modest hulling mills.

13. Limited annual budget – There is no budget either from the government or external sources as such allocated for coffee development *per se* and the budget allocated in bulk for LPMC for all agricultural activities is not adequate enough to focus on coffee development activities in particular.

14. Policy frame work – The government is reported operating in four strategic pillars, viz. national security, economic development, poverty reduction, and infrastructure development. The poverty reduction program or economic development may embrace the development of the coffee subsector, but this program has currently concentrated on food security, mainly development of rice farms, and coffee rehabilitation program has not been started yet on the government side.

15. Absence of coffee development and marketing organization – Currently, there is neither coffee or coffee and cocoa body *per se* that is responsible for coffee development and marketing activities nor fully fledged personnel assigned on coffee. It is the LPMC who handles this crop together with all other agricultural crops. Under such structural arrangement, it would be very difficult to promote coffee production and marketing and compete with other producers on the world market.
IV. Opportunities Available to Revamp Coffee Production

1. Vast area of land with suitable agro-ecology – Large proportion of the population of Liberia dwell in the town, Monrovia alone accommodates 1.5 million out of the estimated total of 3.5 million people. Because of this and other reasons, there is vast area of fallow land that has immense potential for coffee and other agricultural crops production. Specifically, the whole central and northern part of the country is reported highly suitable for Robusta coffee production with some pocket high altitude areas that could be even suitable for Arabica coffee production.

2. Policy support – As already indicated in section III (No 13), policy framework is already in place even though it is not yet implemented on coffee sub-sector development as the government has primarily focused on food security. In addition, rebuilding of basic infrastructure, especially roads, is one of the most priority areas of the government in revitalizing the economy. Therefore, any coffee development program is very likely to get full government support.

3. Specialty coffee production and value addition – It appeared that there are certain opportunities to start rehabilitation and specialty coffee production simultaneously. This is particularly important to add some value to the price of Robusta coffee which is generally lower compared to Arabica through some simple practices in order to encourage the farmers and attract their attention towards coffee production.

3.1 Organic coffee production – Large proportion of the coffee farms have been changed to forest coffee type because of long years of neglect, since the beginning of the civil war in 1989. These forest coffee farms were observed to be highly fertile and very rich in organic matter that it is possible to produce coffee without application of additional inorganic fertilizer. It was also learnt that Robusta can grow well and produce economic yield under moderate shade as noticed from the performance of the coffee trees under shade which was very attractive. Growing coffee under shade is also one way of increasing quality compared to sun grown coffee.

These forest coffee farms are dominated by undergrowth forest bushes and shrubs and big trees are not as such dense enough. Presumably, it can be easily rehabilitated with minimum cost by clearing the under storey bushes and shrubs, stumping the old coffee trees to rejuvenate, and refilling the vacant spaces with new seedlings. The big trees could be
maintained for use as shade trees and at same time reduces cost of land clearing. Probably, thinning of the branches of the big trees may be necessary at some points where it seems too dense to open up for sufficient light penetration and aeration. The other important activity here would be sensitization and training of the farmers, organization of the farmers in to association and certification of the association as legal organic coffee producers and exporters.

3.2 Promotion of *Coffea liberica* production – Liberia is the centre of origin and diversity of *Coffea liberica*. This coffee species was among the three economic species of coffee and in the 1960s its market share was as high as 5%. Probably in the long run, Liberia can exploit this advantage as a sole producer by promoting the production of gourmet liberica coffee for special market.

3.3 Possibility for introduction of *Coffea arabica* production – According to some local coffee experts, there are certain pocket areas in the northern parts of Liberia characterized by high altitude, low temperature and high rainfall that best fit to Arabica. In the long-term, it would be useful to explore these areas and its potential for possible introduction of Arabica coffee, the finest quality and premium coffee, in order to maximize the income of the smallholder coffee producers and foreign revenue of the country from coffee.

4. Tree Crops Research – There is no coffee research *per se*, but it is a component of the tree crops research department of the Central Agricultural Research Institute (CARI). So far, nothing has been started on coffee research, but the opportunity is there to start some preliminary activities if the push comes from the government. To promote coffee production, research is mandatory to generate new technologies, carry out adaptation testing of introduced technologies and fine tune according to local conditions, and provide technical backstopping to the growers.

**V. Measures to be taken:**

1. Rehabilitation of coffee farms and settlement of displaced coffee families - As already indicated, almost all the coffee farms have been abandoned and changed to wild type (forest coffee) because of long years of neglect and displacement of the coffee producing families during the civil war. Therefore, to revitalize coffee production in the country, the first and most priority without doubt is to aggressively campaign on coffee rehabilitation and resettlement of the coffee families. Probably, the displaced coffee families have partly or largely settled back to their village on their own, but they lack proper shelter (house) and other social services. In
addition, since poverty rate is so high, the farmers are not in a position to launch any rehabilitation activity on their own. Therefore, this rehabilitation program may demand a lot of inputs and involvement of different actors at all levels. Thus, to be more efficient and impact oriented, it requires some systematic approaches like prioritizing coffee producing areas based on their production potential and implementing step by step. It would be beyond the scope of this report to describe details of the rehabilitation and resettlement activities and action plan, but it will be included in IACO’s revitalization project (CFC/ICO – 143) which is being developed by the consultant CABI – Africa taking in to account the various constraints mentioned earlier. Liberia is one of the beneficiaries of this project.

2. Establishment of a viable Extension System – In the absence of an effective extension system in place, the rehabilitation effort may not be successful. A well thought extension system must be established that is responsible to effectively provide the following major services:

2.1 Intensive sensitization and training of the farmers – Because of the low return from coffee and higher management cost compared to rubber, palm oil or cocoa, the farmers have developed hatred and lost interest. Therefore, intensive sensitization on the economic importance of coffee, its significance as a means of diversification of income sources, possible maximization of coffee prices through different ways of value addition, etc., is very important to reverse the earlier negative image and develop sentiment of love in the minds of the farmers.

In addition, farmer’s technical knowledge about coffee production practices is extremely limited. Provision of practical training and demonstration to the farmers on nursery management in raising of seedlings, field planting and management, proper harvesting and processing is vital.

2.2 Training of Subject Matter specialists – Skilled human power with adequate knowledge on coffee production, processing and storage is highly limited to carry out fully fledged extension services. It is important to train subject matter specialists on the basic and applied aspects of coffee production, processing, storage and quality control to produce adequate number of skilled human power that would further serve as trainers of development agents and the growers.

2.3 Organizing farmers – It is necessary to organize the farmers in to groups, association or cooperative to facilitate communication, training, and input-credit services; produce required volume of export coffee and directly benefit the farmers from the profit of coffee sale.
2.4 Multiplication and distribution of improved planting materials - The existing neglected coffee farms were planted with traditional low yielding cultivars. It is important to introduce improved varieties from abroad, multiply and distribute planting materials that are high yielding and good in quality to maximize coffee production and encourage the farmers. These planting materials could be used for establishment of new plantation or refilling of the rehabilitated old farms.

2.5 Facilitating input supply and credit facilities – The resource poor smallholders coffee growers cannot easily access to credit services or capable to buy the necessary agricultural inputs and farm tools on their own. These services should be facilitated by the extension department and it is one of the most important means of encouraging the farmers.

3. Incentives – Farmers have left behind the production of coffee for various reasons: (a) rehabilitation of the neglected coffee farms requires significant amount of initial capital, (b) subsequent maintenance, harvesting and processing is said to be labor intensive compared to rubber, cocoa and palm oil, (c) farmers are resource poor and the return from coffee is not attractive because of its low prices, (d) there is shortage of labor, and (e) preference for other cash crops such as rubber, cocoa and palm oil is high because of its ease of management and better return than coffee. Therefore, to attract coffee producers and revamp coffee production, incentives in the form of (a) credit services with reasonable grace period, (b) subsidies on agricultural inputs, and (c) guarantee for stable and fair price, and other incentive mechanisms are very important particularly right at this initial stage of rehabilitation period and where competition by other crops is a challenge. Once the farmers are capable to stand on their own and established their coffee farm, allocation of good amount of revolving fund could be just enough that subsidies and other free services could be minimized or totally lifted.

4. Government support – To revitalize coffee production in Liberia, government support is very necessary in many ways:

4.1 Establishment of coffee or coffee and cocoa development and marketing body – At present, there is no government organ responsible for coffee or coffee and cocoa per se. It is handled together with all other crops by the Liberian Produce Marketing Corporation (LPMC). To maximize the income from coffee and become competitive on the world market, special emphasis should be given to coffee development so as to increase production, productivity and quality. In effect, a fully fledged independent body is vital who is mainly responsible for:
• Establishment of effective extension system that facilitates regular training, input supply, and credit services; organize farmers in to groups, association or cooperative as the case may be; and carry out similar other extension activities
• Establishment of marketing system that enables to control price, quality standard and marketing chain between different actors. Effective marketing system is particularly important to set attractive coffee price and control its implementation. This is probably the best means to avoid the current cross-border trade to neighboring countries and ensure sustainable coffee production.
• Preparing national coffee development plan and setting vision that would assist as government directive to aggressively campaign on coffee development activities on a sustainable basis
• Preparing annual budget and action plan for coffee development and marketing activities
• Promote coffee development projects through bilateral agreement or other means with different donors to mobilize fund for coffee development activities
• Representing the government at national and international level for all coffee matters

4.2 Allocation of annual budget – Regular annual budget is necessary for having permanent staff that is responsible to carry out coffee rehabilitation and all other development activities on regular basis.

4.3 Policy framework – as indicated in section III (13), the policy framework is in place, but coffee development has not been well focused unlike forestry and mining sectors as a component of revitalizing the economy. Therefore, it would be advisable to refocus on coffee development subsector as one of the components of the strategy to revitalize the economy of the country through diversification of the sources of generating foreign exchange revenue. The presence of such policy would serve as government directive to the implementing agencies to give due emphasis for the promotion of coffee development and marketing.

4.4 Infrastructure and facilities – For successful rehabilitation and development program, among others, roads that access to at least the major coffee producing areas and transportation facilities are indispensable. The resource poor farmers are also not in a position to own coffee pulping factories and hullers, construct drying trays or cemented floor. These and other related facilities are important to produce coffees of standard quality and fetch premium price. Therefore, government intervention to the extent possible is very crucial in these areas to facilitate coffee development endeavors in the country.
4.5 Coffee research and skilled local human power development Program – While the very initial stage could be assisted by consultancy services and short-term trainings, simultaneously, it is important to launch coffee research and intensive local staff training program to ensure sustainable supply of technical backstopping and introduce or generate improved coffee management, processing and storage practices to the growers.

VI Project Development

1. Project Priority – The CFC financed IACO coffee development project (CFC/ICO – 143) which is under preparation by CABI – Africa will be designed to focus primarily on coffee rehabilitation and installation of displaced coffee families in selected project area as top priority. The rehabilitation program may include among others, rehabilitation of coffee farms, practical training to farmers and development agents on rehabilitation activities (systematic land clearing, proper stumping of coffee, lining and refilling or new planting, pruning and management, etc.), training of subject matter specialists on coffee management, processing and quality grading, facilitation of input supply and credit facility together with the relevant government body, awareness creation and organization of farmers in the project area in to associations or groups to facilitate service provision to the farmers, develop template for national coffee development plan, design mechanisms for value addition (e.g organic coffee production) to maximize the return from coffee and encourage the coffee farmers.

Apart from benefiting the project group, the project area will serve as a model for demonstration and training of other farmers to extend the rehabilitation and management practices and lessons learned to other coffee growing districts and counties.

2. Project Location – Gbarnga in Suakoko District of Bong County. It is about 140 km from Monrovia, but there is a nearby big city known as Banga. It is an advantage to promote coffee production in this area since cocoa is not doing well even though rubber is still a competitive plant.

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