

**A REPORT ON NEEDS ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED IN SJFAP,s
OPERATIONAL AREAS IN PORT LOOK DISTRICT
- SIERRA LEONE -**

A decade of civil war in Sierra Leone destroyed the relevant fabrics necessary for national development. Agriculture being an important sector in that venture was seriously affected. Productivity levels declined drastically. The country now has to rely on food aid and imports.

Before the war all agencies operating in the country focused their activities on development.

With a cessation of hostilities, many of them have to shift their programs from caring for displaced to the resettlement and rehabilitation of these unfortunate people. Most of these displaced were from rural areas and farming represented their main source of income. Seeds, tools and food supplies were provided to help these previously displaced people to kick start their farming activities. Such programs also entailed huge resources.

After a 2 – 3 year period of calm in the implementation of a resettlement and rehabilitation program it is expected that farmers have returned to pre war status.

For the evaluation of the situation a study has been implemented. The aim of this study was to profile various issues perceived by farmers as bottleneck to increased agricultural productivity, in the SJFAP operational areas in Port Look district. It is hoped that the outcome of this study will provide information that will be relevant to the development of a project proposal with activities scheduled to fit into the calendar of work of our beneficiaries.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection can be effected through various means. Structured questionnaires could be designed and administered to generate information. The data derived from such a means is mostly quantitative. This system uses various sampling techniques to generate information that is representative of a whole population and enables one to use several statistical manipulations to present the data. Unfortunately this information can provide information on what is happening and its magnitude. It does not explain at in-depth why. Also for an outsider who does not have a prior knowledge of the situation on the ground, some of the questions will be wrongly focused.

Another means of collecting information could be the use of a guide where open-ended questions are asked. The information generated is mostly qualitative in nature and is difficult to quantify. Thus broad generalizations cannot be made using this system of information collection. In as much as this method of data collection can provide an insight as to what is happening, it also provides information as to why

things are happening. Data generated from such a data collection method can help us better tailor projects to meet with the real needs of beneficiaries.

The brief description of the two approaches does not mean one is better than the other. Both can be used in a complimentary nature to generate wholesome information. One can be used in the place of the other based on the purpose for which the information is to be utilized. For the purpose of this study, it was considered that the latter would be more useful

Using a guide, a series of informal discussions were held with various stakeholders and was as follows.

- Representatives of villages that make up a cluster in the cluster centre.
- Extension agents of SJFAP.
- Director and co-ordinator of SJFAP.
- Head of different agric institutions in the study area (this was done in a district co-ordination meeting)
- Final year agric students who are ex-combatants of the St. Josephs Vocational Institute.

STUDY AREA

The study area for this assessment was limited to SJFAP, s targeted operational areas in Port Look district. These areas include the following chiefdoms

Marampa

Masimera

Maforki

Buya Romende

Koya

CROP PRODUCTION

For crop production, the major issues discussed were, types of crops grown in the area. production levels, food availability, access to improved planting materials and availability and access to extension services.

TYPES OF CROPS GROWN

With all the stakeholders discussed with, there seems to be a similar trend on the types of crops produced. Rice. Cassava, Sweet potatoes, Corn, garden eggs, pepper, Krain krain are mostly produced. On a small scale, crops like sorghum, yams, cowpea and groundnuts are produced in al these areas. All of the crops mentioned above are produced for consumption. Excesses are marketed in Trade fairs (weekly crop markets).

CROP PRODUCTION LEVELS

Production levels of these crops were considered to be unsatisfactory by all communities visited. This is more so for rice. They claimed that for upland and bolilands, 15 bushels was the maximum for any one-bushel cultivated. Yields in such ecologies can drop to as low as 10 bushel. For swamps a maximum of 20 bushels can be realised during good years but can drop to between 12 and 15 bushels during bad periods. Production levels for other crops were difficult to determine because of the erratic pattern of harvesting. They harvest consume and/or sell sometimes on a weekly basis.

The farmers attributed this generally unsatisfactory yield to the absence of chemical fertilizers. When cost issues were discussed, a bag of NPK fertilizer going for about Le90.000/00 seems unaffordable. The matter was laid to rest, as it did not sound sustainable. However, from the observation on the ground, it seems cultural practices used in the production of food crops seems to be the cause of low yields. For example nursery practices for IVS cultivation (land preparation and seeding rates), age of seedlings before transplanting, plant population in the field etc are not carried out in the proper way.

Generally, the availability of food during the year for consumption varies from one crop to the other. For rice, harvests do not last beyond June. In all the areas visited, imported rice was cooked and served. Cassava, the second staple is planted during the dries to be eaten in July and August. Unfortunately, there was a high incidence of variegated grasshopper for the past 3 years. Cassava is therefore in short supply for Koya, Masimera and Marampa and Maforki chiefdoms. For the other food crops they are grown right through the year therefore small quantities are almost always available.

AVAILABILITY OF AND ACCESS TO EXTENSION SERVICES

With regards extension services, a few personnel from the ministry of agriculture are located in and around Lunsar. There is one field staff in Mabora, another in Kamasondo and the Block supervisor is in Lunsar. In Masimera chiefdom, farmers do not have access to extension services even though there is one at Masiaka to cover the region of these ,only the Block supervisor is assigned with a motorcycle. The others are without means of transport and cannot move around. Despite the presence of these few extension staff, they do not have an extension package for farmers. They are more of overseers of seed distribution and loan recovery. The extension agents present in all 5 chiefdoms are the ones of SJFAP. But a greater part of their work has been devoted to seeds distribution ,redistribution and loan recovery. They are provided with bicycles, which cannot enhance greater coverage.

AVAILABILITY OF AND ACCESS TO IMPROVED/PLANTING MATERIALS

The previous activity of SJFAP to provide seeds and tools to resettling farm families in all five chiefdoms makes planting material for rice not a problem. But for cassava cuttings, planting materials seems to be a problem in Maforki, Koya, Masimera and

Marampa. This is due to the high incident of grasshopper damage. In Buya Romende chiefdom the incidence of grasshopper infestation was not realised to be serious. For crops like sweet potatoes and groundnuts there is a problem with planting materials in all chiefdom. For the other crops, access to planting materials was not raised as a serious issue. What is lacking is access to improved planting materials. In my discussion with the various groups, improved plantings materials are absent except for the case of cassava and potatoes. These varieties were released in the 70s and early 80s by ACRE project. Farmers have never heard of the NERICAS, SLIPOTS or SLICAS but are indicating willingness to try out these varieties. Even for crops like yams, cowpea etc there is an indication of willingness to intensify its cultivation. The major problem is access to improved varieties and a technology package to promote its production. The ministry cannot be relied on as they lack the means of multiplying even the NERICA varieties they have. Also, for crops like cassava and sweet potatoes new varieties were recently released and extension personnel do not know about them.

MARKETING

In the context of CRS/SL agric strategy, the absence the marketing opportunities was seen as a disincentive to increased agric productivity, as farmers do not realise an appreciable net value of their commodities . Marketing collectively is believed to increase the bargaining power of individual farmers. Communication networks and the quality of products were also considered important in determining the net value of the commodity. These were the key issues looked in the area of marketing.

EXISTENCE OF MARKETING CBO,s

In the clusters visited for the various organisations, marketing CBO, s do not exist. This seems to be the general trend. However, SJFAP and its partners are considering it seriously. They are thinking of a situation where produce of association members are collected on a weekly basis and shipped to marketing centres where prior negotiation have been made and are assured of higher prices. The knowledge of prices of the various commodities to be marketed is of vital importance to achieve such a goal and the organisation is willing to liase with the various market centers to collect such information. The market centres so far identified by the group are Makeni, Foredugu, Masiaka and Freetown.

Various crops mentioned above are grown but however, those mostly grown for cash are rice, pepper garden eggs, okra and maize. The potential buyers if such a scheme is to go through are traders from Makeni, Lunsar, Masiaka and Freetown.

ROAD NETWORKS

The nature of major roads in all the chiefdom visited seems fairly good at the time of the exercise. This does not rule out few terrible spots. But all the chiefdoms are busy in rehabilitation work and are supported with FFW and tools. However, palm log bridges are prevalent but looking at the rate at which vehicles ply these areas it may not be worthwhile investing in the construction of expensive culverts and

bridges. It may make sense for a few areas. Rehabilitating of existing palm log structures may make sense as a priority at the moment. FFW projects may be highly effective for e.g. for a two day period spent in Masimera chiefdom, I did not come across any vehicle

TRANSPORT FACILITIES

The intension of the Buya Romende chiefdom farmers association seems good but they claim to be plagued with some constricts. They do not have a ready access to transport facilities for collective procurement and marketing. If a transport facility is provided, this could ease movement of these commodities. The issue worth considering is the management of such a facility. I will recommend the SJFAP be provided with such a facility and they let it out on hire to various associations as and when needed.

IMPROVING QUALITY OF PRODUCTS BEFORE MARKETING

Another issue raised by this organisation is one of improving the quality of the crop before marketing. This can be done by processing .It is especially so for rice. Farmers prefer to mill rice before marketing. This is to reduce the net volume of the rice to be marketed. At the moment ,women are milling their rice using local methods(mortal and pestle).This takes so much of their time and increases the number of broken grains not fit for marketing. These women would have preferred milling machines but these are not available except for foredugu and Lunsar. But the installation of a rice-milling machine is associated with or tied to several considerations. The location of the mill, the level of rice production within that geographical area to feed the mill, transport facilities from the various villages, storage facilities, parboiling and drying facilities are worth considering.

The situation described above is for rice but it is also true for other crops even though the know-how and associated facilities are not available. But for a crop like cassava, it is highly perishable after harvesting it. The tubers can however be processed into various forms to improve its quality and its shelf life. One of this forms is gari. This is a cassava product that is widely eaten in the country. It is mostly processed by women and provides them with a steady source of income. Its productions expected as a need but the factor hindering its production is the grating of the tubers. This, when done manually by women takes so much time and energy. Grater machines have been designed and farmers think this will ease their job and will encourage large-scale production. There are issues worth considering about our involvement with grater machines. Should these machines be provided free? Or should farmers pay for them? Another issue is that are cassava production levels high enough to justify the use of a machine? The marketing aspect does not seem to be a problem as there is always a needy market.

CONSTRUCTION OF MARKET STRUCTURS

The issue of a market structure was discussed at length with communities in Buya Romende chiefdom. The paramount chief was even present in one of them. This

was so because a market structure is under construction. Of the issues discussed, the sustainability aspect was considered paramount. One of the sustainable aspects highlighted by the paramount chief is that a chiefdom development committee has been formed to over see the activities of the market. For revenue collection, a contract has awarded to a winner of a bid to undertake this venture. An amount is to be paid monthly to chiefdom coffers and operational costs for running the market rests with the contractor, e.g. payment of dues collectors, printing of tickets etc. this situation also applies to periodic markets organised in the chiefdom in Foredugu town. For daily markets about 6 villages are participating. They bring commodities to this market on a daily basis for sale. The periodic market draws participants from Port Look district, parts of Bombali and Western Area. These issues are worth considering if CRS is to promote the construction of markets and weekly Trade fairs in the other Chiefdoms.

LAND

During my discussion with the most clusters, access to land did not come up as an issue. This is so for groups that are in rural areas. The issue of land came up with groups that are within and around Lunsar town. Examples Robanka cluster, Marampa cluster and Bokatala. For such groups, the members reside within Lunsar, and go to work in the outskirts. The land they work on is provided on an annual basis with no guarantee of continuity. In all of the areas visited developed swamps are not available. But all the groups expressed it as a need. Some communities out off the S.J.F.A.P. operational area, had swamps that were once developed, but farmers did not bother to rehabilitate them. They have even destroyed the remaining bonds. If we are to be involved in swamp development, it should be on a pilot basis. Land laws should be arranged for farmers within and around Lunsar who do not have continually access to the same piece of land. For cluster in rural communities one swamp per cluster will be developed. For farmers to realise the productive potential of such swamp multiple cropping will be practiced using short duration high yielding crop varieties. Rice varieties like NERICAS will be introduced and will be followed by legumes such as groundnut cow pea etc. vegetative matter of these legumes will be incorporated into the soil to minimised soil nutrient mining due to continues cropping. Swamp rehabilitation /development should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means to an end.

The problem of soil fertility is expressed by most of the farmers of the different cluster. This is more so, for farmers cultivating boliland. They expressed the need for chemical fertilizers, but considering the cost of a bag of a fertilizer, which goes for about ninety thousand, it does not seem cost effective to them. They seem comfortable with the current fallow period. Fertility, even though it is perceived as a problem, farmers did not attribute it to the fallow. Rather ways of improving it, though the use of fertilizers was their concern. They seem comfortable with the current fallow period.

LABOUR

During the period this exercises was conducted, labour did not come up as a problem. This is so because of their level of productivity and production practices. However, all farmers cultivating boliland expressed the need for tractors to expand their farms. Fortunately St. Joseph Fathers Agricultural Projects have tractors. This farming period one tractor was let out on hire and about 100 acres of land was ploughed. They hope to let out two next years. The ministry of agriculture cannot do much; even the few power tillers provided are used only for hauling goods

POST HARVEST PRACTICES

There is growing awareness amongst farmers about post harvest loses. This may be as a result of a workshop conducted by SJFAP on post harvest issues. However even with this growing awareness determining the quality of loss seems difficult. But by using farmers unit of measure and further probing, we were able to agree on some figures, which were translated to percentages. This information on post harvest losses was collected mainly for rice. For seed rice loses can be as high as 100% and for rice meant for consumption, Losses can be as high as 40% of not handled properly after harvest.

The root causes of loose identified by the farmers were improper drying and storage due to lack of the appropriate facilities. When grains are dried on mud surfaces, farmers claim these grains are mixed with dust, retain moisture and even loose them whilst gathering them at the end of the day. Some farmers estimated a loss of one TP for every bushel (5%) in some cases. When grains with high moisture content are stored, moulds and mildew develop and may destroy the viability of seeds and the quality of the grain. Also, during storage, grains can absorb moisture from mud floors and encourage growth of moulds, which can destroy these seeds. Rat infestation was also perceived, as a problem during storage of condition is not appropriate. They can destroy up to 30% of the grains. With roofs made of thatch, leakages during the rains can also destroy the grains as they absorb moisture, which encourages the growth of moulds.

A number of drying floors and grain stores have been constructed in all the 5 chiefdoms SJFAP have been operating but by and large a greater number of farmers protect their grains using the poor facilities mentioned above (drying grains on mud floors, mats or plastic sheeting and storing grains in house with mud floors and thatch roofs. These farmers have suffered great post harvest losses more so when they are just resettling and reconstructing their homes. The new makeshift structures they now have cannot provide enough room to have their families not to talk of grains.

With the few drying floors and grain store constructed farmers have been able to realise their need. This is more so for these controversial grain stores farmers with

drying floors in their communities now appreciate how helpful this facility is in the drying of their grains and which subsequently leads to the reduction of post harvest losses.

With grain stores there had been a controversy over its use. In the past farmers expressed need for these structures but when once they are constructed, no body will like to keep his harvest in a public store. These structures became white elephants. Now, stores have been perceived to be useful. With the agric recovery strategy of SJFAP, communities now own rice, which could be used for their development priorities. This has to be kept in stores. Also, the effect of the war which left a lot of burned down houses make community stores more useful Farmers. with little space to house their families are more than willing to keep their grains in stores. This is more so for grains to be used as seeds. There is a manifestation of this in all 5 chiefdoms. Principally it is so in Buya Romende chiefdom where communities have undertaken to construct stores on their own using local materials (Bush stick, mud block and thatch). See attached list. It is of my opinion that such communities should be provided with some assistance to improve on the quality of such storage facility.

FARMERS ASSOCIATIONS

There seems to be some confusion over the use of the terms farmers associations, clusters and CBOs. In the case of Buya Romende chiefdoms Development Farmers Associations, there is what they call a farmers association which in a registered CBO. This association is the umbrella organisation that covers the whole chiefdom. The association is made up of clusters . Each village is represented in the cluster and clusters are represented in the association. This is not so for the other chiefdoms. In such areas, each village makes up an association and the village association coalesce to form clusters.

Despite variations in terminology there is some form of a functional organisation in all 5 chiefdoms. However, there is a need for a unified diction that will cut across the board to make reporting much easier. I will therefore suggest that an organisation at village level be referred to as village development group. The village when put together because of proximity to one another makes up the cluster. The different clusters put together can form the association. When this association is registered with government can be referred to as a CBO.

These organisations were established in the 90s and have received seeds tools and food resources provided by CRS. Each member in the organisation is provided with seeds on loan at an interest rate of 50% and a commitment the community handles fee of 3 tps .All of the seeds collected. They make decisions on what to do with it. Seed loans collected are redistributed to new farmers. Old farmers also receive these loans but only about ½ the quantity previously provided is given to them.

For an organisation such as Buya Romende chiefdom Associated farmers Development Organisation, drying floors and grain stores have been constructed. Also, cassava graters have been provided to gari production.

St. JOSEPH FATHERS

St Joseph Fathers have been working in partnership with ENGIM since the early 90s.

EXTENSION APPROACH

As an off- shoot to the agric component of the SJ. Voc. Institute SJF were helping graduates to settle in there home villages where they practice agriculture using improved techniques. It was hoped that communities would be persuaded to copy these techniques after they have observed the results. Inputs such as seeds tools and oilpalm seedling were provided to the students on loan. Community stores were also constructed to provide storage facilities for the inputs and the harvests. The scheme was not too successful and everything collapsed come the war. However, there were useful lessons learned.

- Graduates were organised into groups of 3 – 4 and laid lessons arranged. Some of these graduates in the group did not hail from the village in question. These set of students started seeing themselves as working for the others who hail from the village even though the laid lease was for all of them. They eventually walked out of the group.
- The type of activities students were undertaking was limited to rice and oil palm production thus the annual income was small and served as a disincentive to continuity.
- At the initial stages of the projects SJF were providing stipend to these students to cushion the effects of financial constraints of the onset of the project. These made the students to become dependent on such handouts and started seeing themselves as workers of SJF and not as farmers. Attempts to wean them off led to frustrations and they eventually decided to back out of the scheme.

In principle, the tenets of the above scheme are good as it tries to encourage young graduates in agriculture to go into farming as a profession rather than waiting for jobs in the public sector. A thorough reflection needs to be done to see how graduating ex-combatant and even none combatants can be promoted to settle for a life at the farm.