Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Strengthening the institutional linkages between national agricultural research systems actors and improving agricultural research for development in Liberia

Policy brief

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POLICY BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the main source of food and fiber and a key pillar of the economy of Liberia, where it provides income and employment for about 70 percent of the population. However, increasing agricultural productivity and the competitiveness of the sector has been a major challenge for the government and its development partners. Ensuring adequate investment in agriculture, including investing in agricultural research could be the best way to overcome this challenge.

The national agricultural research systems (NARS) of Liberia, which includes public and private research organizations and the universities, play a very important role in advancing research on sustainable agricultural productivity in the country. For NARS to have a deeper understanding of the challenges both at farm and system levels, they need technical and financial support to increase their efficiency and functional capacity to sustainably enhance the impacts of agricultural research for development projects (AR4D) and achieve national food and nutrition security. Technical support, in the form of national guidelines, can provide NARS with essential tools to streamline their efforts on research for development, increase their efficiency, and achieve better outcomes and impacts. Unfortunately, such support has been either limited or conspicuously absent in Liberia.

In order to strengthen organizational development and enhance the effectiveness of the NARS to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development goals (SDGs), the assessment of AR4D implementation and the intuitional linkage amongst various actors is essential. This assessment is needed to identify opportunities to enhance their capacities, and to expand and strengthen their

abilities to respond to growing dynamic challenges and achieve national food and nutrition security. Technical support, in the form of national guidelines, recommendations and policy briefs can all provide the NARS actors with essential tools to streamline their efforts, increase their efficiency and achieve better outcomes and impacts. A good understanding of the systemic problems and gaps is also key to identify the supporting tools such as lessons learned, guidelines for better implementation, policy briefs and recommendation for creating a better enabling environment. These can all lead to sustainable impact on the ground. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment and analysis of a case study of the NARS in Liberia was undertaken to derive lessons learned, recommendations and guidelines to support research for development efforts by the NARS through development of an integrated and coherent approach

for research and dissemination of proven technologies and practices. The assessment included the following outputs:

(i) clear understanding on the organizational and management of the NARS in Liberia;

(ii) review AR4D projects implemented previously in the country to explore gaps and opportunities and draw lessons learned;

(iii) develop guidelines and criteria that can be adopted to effectively help AR4D implementation;

(iv) assess the institutional linkages and collaboration within and among NARS and AES actors;

(v) strengthen the capacity of research staff on AR4D through training sessions on the necessary elements that ensure better implantation of AR4D for enhanced impact on the ground; and

(vi) develop a policy brief that offers specific recommendations to ensure an enabling environment for better implementation of AR4D to achieve the target impact on small-scale producers.

POLICY BRIEF

THE CONTEXT

Since 2005, the Government of Liberia has increasingly invested in agricultural research, although the scale of the investment has not been enough to yield the transformation required to position the sector to better respond to the agriculture development needs of the country. Production technologies and knowledge generated by Liberia's national agricultural research institute, the Central Agricultural Research Institute (CARI), and its sister institutions, have not been sufficient to sustain agricultural production and to enhance food security, despite the increasing need to sustainably solve the food and nutrition problems and enhance the contribution of the agriculture sector to economic growth and the national development of the country.

The comprehensive case study revealed that the situation of AR4D in Liberia has improved dramatically over the last 10 years, thanks to efforts by the government and its development partners to develop and initiate implementation of policies aimed at revitalizing the AR4D system in the country. To sustain the gains made over the years, however, it is recommended that the government administration should build on what has already been achieved to make the system more resilient and responsive to the dynamics of the present and future realities. In conclusion, the study found that the NARS of Liberia have shown great potential to significantly transform and advance agricultural production in the country. Overall, however, the agricultural research institutions in the country remain in urgent need of further institutional development.

This policy brief has been developed to offer specific key-recommendations and lessons learned, which the Government of Liberia could consider for strengthening its support to the NARS of the country. Ultimately, the recommendations are intended to ensure efficient adoption of the proposed methodologies for enhancing the impact of the AR4D efforts of the NARS in Liberia.

POLICY BRIEF

Key findings

The major findings and lessons learned from the comprehensive case study that need to be urgently addressed are, although not limited to:

1. The AR4D programs undertaken by most of the NARS actors in the country lacked proper organization and structure, and require adequate governance structure to enable them to achieve the target impact on end users.
2. Linkages between and among the NARS organizations and the agricultural extension and advisory services (AEAS) of the country were weak and inefficient and need further strengthening through adequate policies.
3. The institutional framework and capacity for AR4D at CARI and other NARS organizations in the country were still fragile and need urgent support to foster their functional capacity to innovate and deliver as expected.
4. The NARS lacked effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and documentation systems for implemented AR4D projects, both within the NARS and at the Ministry of Agriculture. The NARS organizations should be supported to establish and institutionalize M&E for the AR4D programmes they implement. The M&E programme of the Ministry of Agriculture should be prioritized and empowered to regularly track, document and report the progress and outcome of AR4D projects implemented by all AR4D actors in the country, as this is essential for informing policy and decisions at the national level.
5. Accountability mechanisms to ensure value for money in AR4D implementation in Liberia appeared limited or lacking and need to be associated with all implemented programmes to ensure value for money and the added value of implemented AR4D.
6. Exit strategies and sustainability plans for AR4D were either inadequate or absent and need to be considered in all planned projects and programmes to ensure the sustainable adoption of research outputs by end users.

POLICY BRIEF

Recommendations and way forward

The key recommendations drawn from the comprehensive analysis conducted through desk review and participatory discussions are listed below:

NARS organizational framework

- **NARS organizations should rationalize their research programs to make them more responsive to the AR4D needs and priority of the country.** Encourage and support all the NARS organizations in the country to properly structure their research programmes and develop and publish comprehensive strategies for their research activities. This should help position each of them to contribute more effectively to the delivery of the AR4D needs of the country in their own unique way.

- **Establish and maintain an official strategic collaboration framework for NARS organizations in Liberia.** Proper identification and mapping of all organizations that conduct research in agriculture in Liberia should be considered to better understand the scope and dimension of the agricultural research services that can be provided by each organization to identify the areas for integration and collaboration.

- **Put in place a mechanism to guide and coordinate the activities of NARS organizations in Liberia:**
  - Based on mapping of the NARS in Liberia, CARI could do more to foster viable linkages with the various national and international AR4D organizations in the country by:

- Taking steps to establish and maintain a database of all entities that are conducting agricultural research in the country.
- Organizing forums that will bring together the various AR4D actors on a regular basis to share experiences and review progress.
- Leading efforts to develop joint proposals, seek collective funding and to jointly implement research activities with other NARS and international AR4D organizations in the country to help to promote synergy and enable them to achieve more AR4D outcomes for the country.
- Establishing research alliances of disciplines and research themes across the country in addition to multidisciplines across research themes.

- Alternatively, representatives of the various NARS organizations in the country could agree upon the **establishment of a National Agricultural Research Coordination Committee (NARCC)**, which should convene as regularly as possible to give a purpose to its function. The coordinating body should consist of focal points, one appointed by each of the NARS organizations, and a corps of officers to steer its functions. The scope of the coordination efforts should be purely internal, i.e., it could exist only between the member institutions of the NARS with a clear strategy for external coordination with international organizations and donors to ensure full alignment of all externally funded projects under the national coordination targets.

- Subsequently, **a National Agricultural Research Policy** should be developed to guide AR4D implementation and actors in the country, along with a statutory coordinating body, with clearly defined functions, which could also have

the responsibility to mobilize and streamline funding, in addition to working with the relevant stakeholders to set the directions for AR4D within the national research priorities of the country.

- **Increase visibility of NARS organizations in Liberia.** Create awareness among NARS organizations and AR4D stakeholders (farmers/end-users, producer organizations, the AEAS and decision makers) and highlight the potential of each NARS organization in Liberia; to promote the relevance of each NARS organization to the national research strategy of the country.

Research capacities and facilities

- **Provide and/or upgrade the necessary research facilities and capacities,** including research farms, laboratory equipment for soil, animal feed, irrigation water quality testing and advisory services, extension facilities and tools, to facilitate and enhance the R4D efforts of the various NARS and AEAS organizations in the country, particularly CARI. Currently, there is a lack of critical instrumentations and equipment to conduct quality research to support farmers and the agriculture sector of Liberia. The lack of the needed facilities and equipment significantly reduces the capacity of the NARS organizations in the country to perform and deliver their mandates accordingly.

- **Provide the needed funding to maintain the existing research facilities and structures of the NARS;** and establish a program aimed at periodically upgrading the AR4D programs and facilities of the country.

Extension and advisory services (EAS)

- **Empower the EAS.** The Government of Liberia and its development partners should mobilize and provide the requisite funding to the Ministry of Agriculture to help recruit, deploy and support the work of additional extension officers needed to serve the farmers in every district across Liberia. Adequate logistics should also be provided for all extension workers to enhance their mobility and access to farmers' fields. This will be important for accelerating rural development by increasing access to improved agricultural technologies (improved crop varieties, breeds of livestock and best production and crop/livestock/soil management practices), inputs and services in disadvantaged communities.

- **Improve coordination of EAS delivery in Liberia** to improve efficiency in the utilization of the scarce extension resources of the country. The participation of NGOs and private sector organizations and businesses, such as input dealers and suppliers, could be leveraged through a well-coordinated approach by the Ministry of Agriculture to reduce the risks of confusion, overlapping and duplication of efforts and misallocation of resources, and to enhance synergy to increase the output, impact, and performance of the EAS. Furthermore, the current sectoral coordination efforts by the Ministry of Agriculture should be expanded and focused further toward ensuring full compliance of all the private and other public EAS providers with both the national AR4D priorities and the EAS policies of the Government of Liberia to strengthen its role in communicating the results of agricultural research to all concerned stakeholders.

- **Organize regular research-extension forums.** There is an urgent need to support the development and establishment of research extension forums to bring together both NARS and AEAS actors on a regular basis to review AR4D progress, share experiences on emerging issues and adopt appropriate plans of action for the benefit of the smallholder farmers/end-users.

- **Improve institutional framework and capacity for research at CARI (as the national lead agricultural research institute):**
  - Establish sub-stations for regional testing and adaptation of agricultural technologies and innovations across Liberia. There is considerable variability in the agroecological conditions across the different regions of the country. Hence, the research activities of the national institute should be decentralized to make it more effective and responsive to the specific needs of farmers in each of the various agroecological zones of the country.
  - CARI should leverage collaborative efforts with the institutions providing higher education in agriculture around the country to enable some of them to serve as sub-stations for CARI to encourage efficient utilization of the available research resources of the country.
  - Support the development and establishment of standard procedures for planning, organizing, and implementing and documenting the AR4D activities.
  - The Government of Liberia should increase technical, administrative and financial support to CARI and build on and intensify efforts to fully revitalize the NARS of the country.
  - The Government of Liberia and its development partners should improve and sustain funding flow and allocations to support AR4D efforts at CARI.

NARS performance in implementation of AR4D

- **Provide regular refresher training to enhance researchers' knowledge and skills on the organization and implementation of AR4D.** Researchers need to be supported to constantly improve and update the quality of their knowledge and skills on various aspects of AR4D planning and implementation, including project proposal writing, project management, risk management and monitoring and evaluation. This will be essential to not only facilitate their work, boost their confidence and develop their profile, but also it should enable them to contribute more effectively to AR4D implementation in the country for a sizeable impact on the smallholder farmers and end-users.

- **Individual researchers/NARS organizations could improve their performance in implementation of AR4D by:**
  - Taking steps to guarantee the participation of all stakeholders in decision making on AR4D topic identification and implementation.
  - Providing ethical training and increasing awareness on ethical considerations for implementing AR4D projects among researchers and project leaders to promote fairness, accountability and encourage stakeholders' participation in the whole cycle of AR4D projects.
  - Ensuring that the projects they plan and implement are linked to the national priorities of the country.
  - Fully considering the applicability, adoptability, affordability, gender sensitivity and environmental impact of every intervention during the planning, implementation and exit stages of the project.

- **Develop and implement a robust monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system and stakeholder feedback mechanism for AR4D projects in Liberia:**
  - Like the Ministry of Agriculture, NARS organizations should institutionalize monitoring and evaluation to regularly assess the progress and impact of their programmes and activities in the country.
  - The M&E programme of the Ministry of Agriculture should be further prioritized and strengthened to enhance its relevance and effectiveness.
  - Researchers should be trained and provided the skills to effectively utilize stakeholders' feedback on AR4D implemented by the NARS, as such feedback can be useful for learning if any adjustment needs to be made during the implementation of an on-going project to facilitate adoption of the introduced innovations and technologies, and to better inform decisions on new projects.

- Researchers should be trained and provided every needed support to document and publicize the outputs and lessons learned from their AR4D work, which could be utilized for further investment.
- The government and the Ministry of Agriculture should put in place/reinforce mechanisms for ensuring accountability for the deliverables expected of all AR4D projects implemented in the country to ensure value for money.

- **The Ministry of Agriculture in Liberia should put in place/ reinforce mechanisms for ensuring the sustainability of all AR4D projects implemented in the country** to ensure that beneficiaries continue to benefit from the results of introduced AR4D interventions after the project closure. Researchers should develop and integrate sustainability plans for projects they implement to ensure that the impact of their interventions are felt accordingly by the beneficiaries during and following the end of the project.

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