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LIBERIA: Government hunger strategy signifies shift to development

21 Aug 2007 09:24:09 GMT

Source: IRIN

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MONROVIA, 21 August 2007 (IRIN) - Liberia is finalising a strategy aimed at boosting the government's capacity to tackle hunger and malnutrition - one pillar of an overall turn towards development after years of stop-gap measures aimed at picking up the pieces from war, observers say.

"This is the Liberian government reorienting itself towards development," said researcher Todd Benson of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), who assisted agencies working on the strategy.

The national "Food Security and Nutrition Strategy", developed by the government in collaboration with the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), identifies how the government will coordinate itself to tackle chronic hunger - a challenge across the region but particularly in Liberia where 14 years of war gutted infrastructure and left massive poverty and malnutrition.

A nationwide survey in 2006 found 39 percent of children under five are stunted and 27 percent are underweight, according to a WFP document on Liberia. Chronic malnutrition is over 40 percent in nine of Liberia's 15 counties and 30-40 percent in the remaining six. The UN defines "food secure" as having reliable access to an adequate quantity and quality of food.

The strategy also covers "nutrition security", which includes improving access to basic services like health care and a sanitary environment as much as improving diets.

"This strategy provides a framework for collaboration, in which we can all focus on what we need to do to ensure food is available in sufficient quantities to all Liberians," Agriculture Minister J. Chris Toe told IRIN from the capital, Monrovia.

As the lead agency, the Agriculture Ministry will present the strategy to the entire cabinet for approval in the next few weeks, Toe said.

An executive summary of the strategy says the government "recognises that to further its ambitions of peace, reconciliation, stability, and development, the nation as a whole and each Liberian household must achieve food security and improved nutrition. Certainly, the Liberian economy rests heavily on the food security and the nutritional well-being of its citizens."

Starting from zero

While a turn towards long-term development means ultimately a Liberia standing on its own two feet, development strategies in the nearer term will still reserve a considerable role for outside assistance, in a country that saw what Planning and Economic Affairs Minister Toga McIntosh has called "institutional meltdown" during the war.

"The government has not yet built the necessary capacity to take over 100 percent from [non-governmental organisations (NGOs)]," Agriculture Minister Toe told IRIN. "It is urgent that we prepare ourselves before all the NGOs go away. The transition cannot be abrupt; it must be gradual and well-coordinated."

He added, "We ask our partners for their assistance and their understanding as we build our capacity."

Helping build government capacity is a primary aim of the food security and nutrition strategy, development and aid workers say. And that remains a huge task. "The Agriculture Ministry is really starting from zero," Benson said. "The capacity constraints in Liberia are strong."

A May outline of the food security strategy said: "Most of the county-level work in agriculture is currently being done by NGOs with only limited contributions by Ministry of Agriculture staff, since their numbers are extremely few." The document says, "[T]here is considerable need to build capacities for monitoring of food security in the country, particularly in ensuring that early warning can be provided of looming crises of whatever sort."

The strategy will serve as a tool by which donors can most effectively intervene with financial and technical assistance where it is needed most, with an eye towards sustainability, Benson said. "The government can use the strategy to approach donors", and aid agencies can point to the plan in appealing to donor countries, he said.

The government's next step is to draw up an action plan, which will have to lay out who is responsible for what, what resources are needed, what the main capacity constraints are, officials said.

Food security key to development

The strategy stems from an increasing recognition on the part of donors and governments of the importance of eradicating hunger in the overall fight against poverty, officials say. The food security strategy is being finalised just as Liberia is beginning to draft its poverty reduction strategy paper, and the hope is that food and nutrition will figure prominently, sources told IRIN.

Benson said the very process of putting together a food security strategy is beneficial. "The process of developing this is probably as important as the actual document - people are talking about food security policy and stakeholders start to see that food security must be part of overall poverty reduction."

While the effort is being led by the Agriculture Ministry, it is not an agricultural strategy, the document points out. "Many ministries are involved in ensuring food security," Minister Toe told IRIN. "Some areas are prone to food insecurity because of their remote location and inadequate road infrastructure, among other things," he said, noting that this is an example of how various ministries must be involved.

The WFP document on Liberia says the underlying causes of food insecurity are low agricultural production, low purchasing power and limited absorption capacities due to lack of safe drinking water and sanitation. The latest market review shows that outside Monrovia the market system functions poorly, largely due to bad roads, limited transportation and lack of functioning institutions.

Agriculture Minister Toe said political will is also critical to beating chronic hunger. "Resources will be needed to achieve food security for all Liberians. There has to be political buy-in to meet this goal of making the people food secure. We have to be accountable for taking care of our people."

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