



COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION: THE WONEGIZI REDD+ PILOT

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Income from REDD+ will help local communities manage the Wonegizi forest. Credit: Josh Kempinski/FFI

Background

Northwest Liberia holds the largest remaining tract of primary Upper Guinean Forest that once covered all of West Africa. At the heart of this ecosystem lies one of Liberia's most important forests, the Wonegizi Proposed Protected Area, which includes Liberia's third highest peak and meets the Guinean border to form a massive trans-boundary forest complex with the Zياما Biosphere Reserve.

Wonegizi hosts an incredible diversity of species, many of which are endangered, including the African forest elephant, chimpanzee, pygmy hippopotamus, West African red colobus monkey and numerous threatened birds, reptiles and amphibians. It is also home to several species, including the threatened zebra duiker, which are found only in this part of the world.

Like most of post-conflict Liberia, rural poverty at the project site remains extremely serious. Local communities are, by and large, forest dependent, for water, food and land. The project is designed to positively impact the lives of around 10,000 people who make their homes and livelihoods in this landscape, through improved land use, co-management and sustainable financing.

The Challenge

Liberia's forests are under enormous pressure from multiple threats: conversion to oil palm or rubber plantations, commercial logging and development of infrastructure such as roads and railways. Amidst these pressures, Wonegizi is particularly threatened by unsustainable subsistence farming methods, primarily shifting cultivation, plus the extraction of timber, charcoal and 'bushmeat', which are increasingly sold to feed an very poor and rapidly growing population. While rice is the main crop (and driver of conversion), chilli peppers and cacao are also key to local livelihoods. Local people, the Zياما Clan, depend on the forest for water, agricultural land, wild-caught protein, medicines and religious sites.

Previous grants have covered some of the preparatory costs for Wonegizi to become a formal Protected Area (PA), however, this funding was aimed primarily at hard infrastructure and awareness-raising activities only. Existing finance has proven insufficient to fund gazettement, let alone long-term sustainable management of the site. Nor have there been the significant efforts made to ensure that the new PA will have a positive impact on local communities, rather than a constraint that limits opportunities for enhancing their livelihoods and well-being.

Community-based forest management & REDD+

Fauna & Flora International (FFI), together with local NGO Skills & Agricultural Development Services (SADS), and with the support of the Forest Development Authority (FDA), are pioneering a new approach for forest management in Liberia. The Wonegizi Community REDD+ Pilot follows a community-based approach to the design, establishment and co-management of the protected area – still a relatively new approach for Liberia.



Shifting cultivation is contributing to both local biodiversity loss and global warming, as it drives deforestation. Credit: Josh Kempinski/FFI.



Chimpanzees are among the many endangered species FFI is working to protect. Credit: Jeremy Holden/FFI.



The Wonegizi Community REDD+ Pilot will give local communities a say in the management of their forests. Credit: Josh Kempinski/FFI.

Our goals through this project are to:

- Conserve biodiversity, including rare and endangered wildlife
- Protect large areas of mature forest, safeguarding ecosystem services such as freshwater provision, flood control, pollination, cultural values and the provision of foods and medicine
- Empower communities and improve wellbeing by directly supporting local livelihoods and agricultural development
- Prevent millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide from reaching the atmosphere - contributing to global climate change mitigation
- Ensure that revenue generation and benefits to communities are dependent on performance, proving that emission reductions and social and biodiversity co-benefits have been achieved through project activities.

REDD+: Benefits for communities

The Wonegizi REDD+ Pilot will establish a new kind of rural economy in Liberia that conserves forests for development, biodiversity and climate objectives. Effective forest protection will be rewarded under the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation mechanism (REDD+), which rewards local communities for reducing carbon emissions from forests, as well as for conserving and sustainably managing forests and enhancing forest carbon stocks.

The income generated from the sale of REDD+ carbon credits will compensate local people for opportunities lost due to reduced forest exploitation, by providing the following **Project Activities** (and resulting benefits). These have been designed in collaboration with the local communities in response to self-identified needs:

Primarily:

- Technical support, access to inputs and funding to reduce the impact of agricultural drivers of deforestation - by increasing the efficiency of land use and agricultural output, as a way to transition from unsustainable, annual clearing of mature forest (slash and burn) to a permanent rotational farming system, and exploring new market opportunities (e.g. for cocoa).

Additionally:

- Salaried forest protection/monitoring, as alternative income sources for those dependent on hunting (for livelihoods);
- Funds to support land use-planning, co-management training and logistics;
- Whole community-oriented benefits such as funds for improving health, tree nursery establishment, handicraft training centre and, where possible, additional community-wide benefits like repairing rooves of communal buildings;
- Steps will be taken to engage the most marginalised groups in these communities – targeting certain benefits to vulnerable groups, and adoption of a gender-responsive approach in all aspect of the project.

Leading standards

The Wonegizi Community REDD+ Pilot is being developed for certification under the Verified Carbon Standard and Climate, Community and Biodiversity standard (VCS-CCB). A joint validation and verification using these standards offers the most vigorous, external auditing for a forest-carbon project at this (medium-large) scale. In addition, the project's biodiversity components will be designed to be compatible with the CCB Standard, Gold Level.

Designing the Wonegizi initiative around leading international standards ensures the highest quality, robustness and reliability with respect to social, biodiversity and carbon benefits, and provides the framework to generate revenue for the long-term sustainability of the project, by facilitating access to markets and/or public funds for avoided carbon emissions.



Wonegizi Mountain
Credit: Shadrach Kerwillain/FFI.



Baseline carbon and wildlife surveys in Wonegizi, with FFI, Forest Development Authority and local community members. Credit: Josh Kempinski/FFI.



Wonegizi is hotspot for biodiversity, including the rare and endemic pygmy hippo (camera-trap photo)
Credit: Josh Kempinski/FFI.

Supporting community-based REDD+

FFI has been championing community-based forest management for decades, and this now includes several community-led REDD+ projects around the world. For over 15 years, FFI has been supporting the Liberian government and rural populations to better protect and benefit from their forests. In the last five years, FFI has raised awareness and improved capacity for REDD+ implementation, at national & local levels, while also supporting development of REDD+ pilots.

Current status of the project

The Wonegizi Pilot is set to be Liberia's first fully functional REDD+ project, and one of the first examples of collaborative protected area management. This is a tremendous achievement in the context of intense deforestation pressures and other, diverse challenges facing Liberia.

For the project to be in a position to sell Emission Reduction certificates (and access the long-term revenue source needed for project sustainability), significant investments must be made to improve agricultural practices and increase forest protection. Transformative change in local farming and mobilisation of protected area co-management efforts requires a continuation of donor funds. To enable us to reach this goal, the project has secured a significant grant from the Norwegian International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI), which is managed by Norad (the Norwegian department for overseas development).

Looking forward

The Wonegizi Community REDD+ Pilot has the potential to generate substantial income to finance community-based management of the PA and direct community incentives / benefits, through sale of emission reductions.

If successful, the project will provide a model for 'best practice' not only in REDD+ development, from the bottom-up, but also for protected area gazettement and management, agricultural development and community forest management, within the evolving '**production-protection**' paradigm in Liberia. All of these approaches are critically important to achieving 'zero-net deforestation' Liberia. This model will also be scalable, within Lofa County, as the project expands to a **landscape scale**, and replicable across Liberia as REDD+ and community forestry implementation is rolled-out nationally.

The pilot, Liberia's first REDD+ project at the site level, also has a significant role to play in guiding and supporting the development of national REDD+ policy and implementation. Moreover, the project will need to closely align with national processes, emerging 'REDD+ frameworks' and Liberia Forest Sector Program (LFSP), as they develop.

If you have any questions or would like further information please contact:

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