Rural transformation in Liberia: Strategies for civil society participation

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Received 30 October, 2018; Accepted 23 November, 2018

Rural transformation involves a dynamic structural, cultural and economic transition of rural areas to a more economically viable society. This encourages the reduction of inequality, eradication of poverty and enhancement of the living conditions of rural dwellers. Rural areas from the agricultural perspective sustain the urban demand for food and despite this role, lacks basic infrastructural facilities, has a high level of illiteracy, poverty, low self-esteem, poor developmental initiatives and government incentives to spur their poor production to a more viable one. Perceptibly, civil society participation through initiatives and actions to attract amenities such as health care, educational and clean water infrastructures will enhance health care delivery, educational attainment and living standards of rural dwellers. And the mobilization rural dwellers for collective developmental action is an essential component of rural transformation. Also, leadership/advocacy training will enable rural leaders engage constructively with government and development partners to attract the needed developmental incentives aimed at transforming the rural society, help checkmate rural-urban migration and encourage production.

Key words: Civil society, rural transformation, initiatives, development.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of any society such as Liberia is hinged on the local communities that dot the length and width of such environment. Out of Liberia’s 96,320 km² land area, 99% are being occupied as local communities (World Bank, 2018). Currently, Liberia is populated with over 4.7 million people. Approximately 51% of this population live in cities but depend on rural communities for food. These rural communities are characterized by poor economic activities where the lack of opportunity is forcing many young rural dwellers to leave their homes in search of work in overcrowded cities or abroad.

In developing countries like Liberia, the development ratio between the urban cities and the rural areas are abnormal (Uhunmwuangho and Aibieyi, 2013), given the growing integration of the global economy, combined with the intensification of trade liberalization, and the rise in importance of the knowledge-based economy (Pike et al., 2016). These have contributed to many avoidable problems some of which are increasing rural-urban migration, mass poverty, total neglect and abandonment of infrastructures in rural areas. The over congestion of urban areas in the country has left approximately 66% of
the urban population in the slum (MDG, 2015). Economy of the rural areas focuses on the optimal harnessing of rural resources for the enhancement of their living conditions, and it arguably sustains both the urban and national economy. The major economic products (iron ore, diamond, gold and agricultural products) come from the rural areas of Liberia. Generally, Liberia’s economy is agrarian in nature and for many decades, her economy revolved on agriculture. In 2000, agriculture contributed 76.1% to the GDP but declined to 65.2% in 2008 and 34.2% both in 2016 and 2017 (World Bank, 2018). Indeed, over 43% of the total labor force is engaged in agriculture. However, smallholder farmers constitute most of the farming population and these have not effectively and efficiently tapped the numerous abundant rural resources.

RURAL TRANSFORMATION

Transformation implies a gradual growth process through progressive changes in structures, behaviors, culture, and institutions as well as economic growth, reduction of inequality and eradication of poverty. In line with this, rural transformation, therefore, means the transition of rural areas from traditional isolation to a more viable economic society. It can be defined as a process of socioeconomic change involving rural areas to increase rural productivity/economic viability aimed at enhancing rural income, creating employment opportunities, increasing rural access to basic amenities and the reduction of inequality among rural dwellers. Based on the above, rural transformation is concerned with the improvement of the living standards of the low-income population in rural areas on a self-sustaining basis, through transforming the socio-spatial structures of their productive activities and education.

Urban bias and rural transformation

According to Mohanty (2014), the urban bias theory proposes that the development process in developing countries are systematically biased against the rural areas and the bias is embedded in the political structure dominated by the urban groups. However, the rural areas are poor because they are politically powerless. According to Radetzki and Lipton (1978), the most important class conflict in the poor countries of the world today is neither between labor and capital nor between foreign and national interests; it is between rural classes and urban classes. The rural sector contains most of the poverty and most of the low-cost sources of potential advance; however, the urban sector contains most of the articulateness, organization, and power. So, the urban classes have been able to win most of the rounds of the struggle with the countryside. This structural condition of over urbanization contributes to saturated urban labor market with little or no opportunities in rural areas (Gugler, 1982).

Urban bias in Liberia’s development policy is reflected in prices, institutional opportunities, availability, and access to the market, health, infrastructure, communication, and transport linkage and many other structural characteristics of national economies. Most urban residents rely directly or indirectly on government employment, which has been the major stimulus for urban growth. Speaking from the agricultural perspective, government employees are purely overhead expenses as they are non-productive; besides, it is the rural production that sustains the country (IFAD, 2016). Despite this pivotal role of rural areas, they lack the developmental initiative to steer themselves out of poverty and the government is reluctant in siting developmental projects in these areas to enable them grow. Productivity has been low because they lack basic infrastructural facilities. Obviously, provision of basic amenities in rural areas will encourage rural transformation and check rural-urban migration.

RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

The high rate of movement from rural to urban areas over the years in Liberia has constituted certain social, economic, health and environmental risks which contribute to poverty, environmental decay, low agricultural productivity, poor standard of living and increase in mortality. Figure 1 shows the rate of rural-urban migration in Liberia from 2008-2017. It revealed that over the years, there has been a massive movement of rural population to the urban cities. This cannot be divorced from the fact that most government’s transformational policies and programs have been urbanized, thereby creating more employment and educational opportunities and other infrastructural amenities more in the urban areas, compared to the rural areas (McCarty, 2004; Nwakese, 2004; Nwanna, 2004; Todaro and Smith, 2003).

Consequences of rural-urban migration

Today, there is some level of transformation of the infrastructural deficits in the urban set up in Liberia. Gradually, most cities in Liberia have come to experience good health care system, pipe-borne water (although not all cities), good road networks, relative stable power supply, good transport system and other infrastructural facilities that will make life comfortable. All these, lures the rural people, particularly the youths, to abandon some good social and economic ventures in the rural areas for the cities. In 2014, it was estimated by World Bank that 66% of rural-urban migrants in Liberia, end up in slums.
doing nothing, while in their joblessness contribute to the increasing rate of crimes in the cities.

Virtually all able-bodied young men and women that should ordinarily be productive in various agricultural production activities in the rural communities have become commercial bike riders in the streets of Monrovia and other commercially-viable cities. This scenario affects the productive sectors in the rural communities negatively, while also affecting the urban cities negatively. Today, agricultural industries have not only become comatose but in some rural communities, dead. The high levels of importation of domestic products or consumer goods such as rice by the present democratic government are sharp testimonies to this regard. It is becoming increasingly impossible for Liberia to feed herself, largely because of the neglect of the rural areas which has led to the death of the agricultural potentials in those areas.

In fact, virtually all graduates would want to work in Government establishments or other high paying jobs in the cities. Quite ironical, these white-collar jobs are limited considering the number of applicants that chase them. The few available spaces cannot absorb the thousands of graduates churned out by all the Colleges in Liberia. Therefore, these graduates who lie idle in the urban centers end up engaging in wasting their potentials waiting for non-existing jobs. The high level of insecurity in most of the areas in Monrovia is a typical example of the acts of joblessness and idleness on the part of the youths, who ought to be in their local communities being productive in one economic venture or another. No doubt, the available infrastructure in the urban cities has been over-stretched or over-used. Most unfortunately, the white-collar job has been glorified at the expense of agriculture that has been one of the major contributors to the Liberian economy over the years.

(Four Strategies for Liberia Rural Transformation)

Industrial revolution: Liberia is a developing nation, and as such, depends hugely on primary products from the rural areas for survival. There is therefore, an urgent need to revolutionize agricultural production in the rural areas. With the ever-increasing population, there is an imminent need to increase food production. Most farmers who are the centerpiece of food production are small-scaled and to a large extent unscientific in their production, processing, and marketing. There is the need to expand their scale of production by providing them with modern agricultural and technical know-how to enable them adopt improved farming innovations aimed at optimization of resources and income generation. And through the Agro-poles, a self-sustaining industrialization operation linked to the comparative advantage of most of the counties or communities, farming communities can specialize according to their agricultural potentials (Figure 2), which they have a comparative advantage on, to enhance productivity. Central to the growth pole is a group of dynamic industries connected around a resource. For instance, developing the cocoa industrial potentials in Lofa cluster has more advantage to Buchanan cluster. This strategy will sustainably improve the living conditions of the rural farmers and help government/development partners to effectively plan their impact driven developmental programs.

Rural Investment: There is the need to encourage investors to invest in rural areas by investing in agriculture to establish rural industries particularly agricultural processing industries to enhance value addition and create more jobs. This will help solve some of the basic amenities deficits in rural areas such as electricity, good road-network, health centers, and pipe
borne water. It will also checkmate the growing rate of rural-urban migration.

**Rural education:** Education is the process by which a person develops his abilities, attitudes and other forms of behavior which are of positive value in the society in which they live. It widens the scope of our knowledge and understanding of human rights and good governance, essential for rural development. Rural dwellers need both non-formal and formal education to expose them to various skills to manage their homes and most importantly, understand the need to train their children in schools vocationally or otherwise. Adult literacy is an essential tool for rural transformation. It is, therefore, strongly recommended.

**Rural mobilization:** Mobilization of the members of the community to achieve an accelerated pace of development is another tool for rural transformation. This is where rural leaders play a vital role in mobilizing the people to genuinely embark on credible practical community development projects, allowing them to collectively initiate and execute their development programs and projects. This will encourage and provide a framework of activities through the massive commitment of resources for the community in the most effective manner as to satisfy the needs of the community and subsequent development of the communities.

**STRATEGIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN RURAL TRANSFORMATION**

**Healthcare delivery**

Most rural communities lack health facilities and in areas where they are present, they lack the required facilities and personnel. Some women have lost their lives while giving birth to babies because of lack of maternity and qualified doctors/nurses. Civil society organizations can help to attract healthcare projects to the rural areas.

**Education/Training**

Societies prosper when people are educated. Education brings about healthy living and alleviates households from poverty by increasing their incomes. Communities and countries benefit from a more educated workforce and increase participation in community development activities that lead to greater economic growth. Civil society should provide informal education for women,
farmers, out of school children and the less privileged. This will help expose them to understand household needs, acquire different skills, be aware of their rights in society and create civic consciousness in them. This will place them in a status to know what to do at any point in time and how to organize themselves, their family, businesses and engage the government constructively.

Rural mobilisation

Mobilization implies to assemble, prepare or put into operation for development or war. It implies equipping the citizenry for the onerous task of rural development. Therefore, in mobilizing rural dwellers, there is a need to aim at influencing their consciousness, such that their opinions and behaviors will be channeled towards human and community development. In doing so, they will be sensitized to asking for their needs, the path to achieving them and available means of achieving them. It should be a programme of inter-related activities, targets, and strategies systematically arranged and designed to effect positive changes. There is also the need to develop in them the ability to envision for the development of their communities, to ensure that the targets and strategies embarked on yield positive results. The people need to be encouraged to participate fully in the planning of their projects, execution, decision making, and evaluation.

Effective leadership for rural development

Leadership effectiveness measures the extent to which the leader achieves the functions of his office or set out goals. Leadership characterized by mediocrity cannot achieve the set-out goal. The rural leadership has its statutory functions or its targets associated with them. It is the responsibility of the leaders to achieve these targets. Failure means slowing down progress, which reflects on output. Leadership deficits in the rural areas are ultimately traced to a lack of leadership skills. To tackle this problem, civil society should help organize leadership training for the local leaders, youths and the local women to enable them establish a cordial relationship with their followers, practice open door policy for the free flow of information, identification of need, accountability, equity, and fairness. Leaders emotional control will be measured not only by how strongly a leader feels on any matter; not even by the justness and soundness of his feeling but by how he acts, by the extent to which his feelings are so restrained and directed.

Attracting of amenities

Civil societies can help rural areas attract social amenities such as pipe-borne water, healthcare facilities, schools, electricity, computers, books and agricultural processing facilities to add value to products produced by rural farmers because they attract little value when sold raw. They can partner with local groups with a specific agenda to attract developments for their communities and develop their capacity in the identification and solving human right abuses in rural areas.

The government can cooperate with the community through civil society to ensure adequate implementation of their developmental agenda for rural transformation and making of policies relating to rural transformation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Rural development is all-embracing, hence it involves the participation of all. Education of rural dwellers should form the bedrock for rural development. The knowledge gained by rural dwellers will help in understanding the need for programs and how to manage them for their own benefits. It is believed that in solving the problems of rural people, rural development will be enhanced. There is an urgent need for a paradigm shift. The need for rural community transformation in Liberia at this period cannot be over-emphasized. Supporting rural development pays dividends, not just for rural people but for everyone. Investment in agriculture is five times more effective in reducing poverty than investment in any other sector (FAO, 2012). It helps sustain rural communities and transform them into places where a new generation of farmers, fishers and small business owners want to live. Rural development can also address the unequal access to resources that hold back women, who make up almost half of the developing world’s farmers.

This study, therefore, recommends the following policies to help in the transformation of the rural communities to viable economic cities.

i) Emphasis should be given to agriculture as a means of driving the near-collapse of the Liberian economy. In trying to revive same, civil society organizations should develop programs aimed at developing the sector, and government at all levels should relocate the ministries, departments, and agencies that are concerned with agriculture to rural communities. This will boost agricultural production and help lure some vibrant youths who have been roaming the streets back to the rural areas.

ii) Massive infrastructural developments through the provision of basic amenities in the local communities are encouraged. Such provision will encourage more of urban-rural migration, unlike the status quo. This transformation will end up returning these local communities into modern cities.

iii) The Government should establish farms were young agricultural graduates can serve for a year to acquire practical skills on-farm methods and procedures. This will
further transform the local communities’ by changing the stereotype that rural areas are inaccessible, inhabitable for graduates and uneconomic to earn a living. iv) The government should as a matter of paradigm shift set the machinery in motion towards relocating key government investments to the local communities. This will have an immediate effect in turning these rural communities into a dynamic economic hive.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES
