

**Grassroots Agency for Social Services**

**(GRASS)**

**SGP/GEF Project, Sponsored by UNDP and Implemented in the Cestos area of Rivercess County**

**First Milestone Activities Report**

**January 26, 2014**



Project Number: GEF/SGP 028

Project Name: Initiating Small Scale Forest Enterprise (SSFEs) Development as a Conservation Tool in Cestos Senkwehn Area

Location: Jueh and Gbokon Communities, Cestos, Rivercess County

Project Starts: November 13, 2013

## ***Narrative Report***

### *Brief Description of Project Objectives*

Liberia remains the host of over 40 percent of the remaining Guinea Rainforest within Western Africa. However, the forest sector of Liberia continues to be under immense pressure for both commercial purposes and livelihood issues related to economic revitalization and providing benefits for local communities. Subsequently, the biodiversity, natural habitats, and natural resource have been severely impacted. A major contributing factor in this huge divergence of the natural forest and its related resources is the lack of access to information at the local level and less awareness on the impacts of peoples' activities within the forest sector. Though the government of Liberia through the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) has reform laws of the forestry sector and has established many natural reserves and parks around the country, awareness within local communities that live on the forest and its resources are far behind in understanding the implications of their activities and how best they can manage the forest and its natural resources for future generations.

The project will seek to further assess community groups and their activities related to the management and use of forest resources and use these structures as entry in providing the necessary information and/or education on how they can collectively manage their forests and forest resources

With a goal to preserve and sustain the natural habitat and forest resources through promotion of conservation of the forest in the Cestos-Senkwehn area, the objectives of the project are 1: To create awareness on the endangered nature of the pygmy hippo and the benefits of its conservation; 2: To create awareness on the how and the benefits of conservation of the forest and forest resources to local communities; and 3: Provide an alternative source of livelihood for families engaged in anti-conservation forest activities.

### **Project Activities Completed**

#### *Community Visitation and Entry:*

The Grassroots Agency for Social Services (GRASS), in initiating the project in the community visited Cestos City and the project communities (Jueh and Gbokon) in four working days so as to acquaint beneficiaries and stakeholders with the project. The team was met on arrival by Assistant Superintendent for Development of Rivercess County. The team led by the National Program Coordinator, buttressed by other team members, explained in depth the project goal and objectives. On the second day, the

team proceeded to Jueh and arranged a meeting for the evening hours because most of the community dwellers had gone to work in the bush. The meeting was held under a good atmosphere with cross section (women, elders, youth, men and town chief) of the community in attendance. The goal and objectives of the project was explained in depth and questions were entertained. The community dwellers were interested in knowing or understanding the following issues;

Why should they not kill the pygmy hippo?

What would they do if the hippo destroyed their farms?

What will be their benefits if they were to stop hunting/killing hippo?

These were questions posed to the team members by the community dwellers but members of the team was quick to inform the community that the project document has some good sides which includes, benefits but its full details will be disclosed in subsequent meeting which was expected to take place in the not too distant future. However, the communities were informed on the two practical benefits were they to accept the project and give their maximum cooperation. If the community, decides to replicate the awareness in other communities and also decides not to kill hippo the benefits to receive are as follows: the community dwellers would benefit from a starter fund and the community will also have some cattle (goats) to rise but more so they would benefit from the sustainability of their natural resources as well as being one of the communities recognized for their conservation efforts in saving this precious and endangered species of the hippo family .

The starter fund and cattle rearing were intended for income generation purposes so as to reduce the level of poaching on the pygmy hippo. The team briefly discussed the role of the community as well as that of the organization (GRASS). All stakeholders in attendance welcomed the project and expressed their willingness to participate fully but mentioned that since this was the first meeting the community will hold discussion around some of the issues raised and make inputs in the next meeting. The team then visited Gbokon which is close to the bank of the Cestos River where the same process was repeated with participants having frank exchange of views and asked similar question with similar responses from the team. At the end, they intimated that if the project is implemented it would be a good for the community. Those in attendance at both meetings were youth, women, and elders, the religious and traditional leaders. Twenty participants attended the meeting.



*MEETING WITH STAKEHOLDER TO AQUAINT THEM WITH THE PROJECT*



*Distribution of Tools in Gbokon*

*Conduct of Baseline Survey and Holding of Community Driven Development Consultations:*

GRASS completed the conduct of a baseline survey and Community Driven Development Consultation in Jueh and Gbokon as well as their surrounding villages. In

an effort to handle this part of the work professionally, GRASS contracted the services of an expert in Community Driven Development to carry-out this exercise. In carrying out the survey, GRASS designed a term of reference for the consultant. The terms and conditions of the contract stated clearly that the consultant would do the following:

To conduct a baseline survey which includes the designing of a questionnaire, which should high-lights the population, basics, social services and the livelihood activities.

The consultant was also charged with the responsibility of carrying out a Community Driven Development Consultation for the beneficiary communities. The consultation discussed in depth the issue of conserving the natural habitat of the pygmy hippo, its impact on the community and the implications for implementing the project. Poverty and its negative impact on humanity was one of the reasons stated by the communities for preying on the forest as they did. At the end of the work, GRASS received a written report from the contactor. The contractor accepted the term and conditions of the contract and proceeded with the signing ceremony.

In dealing with the issue of poverty which was stated as a reason for exploiting the forest thereby disturbing the natural habitat of the pygmy hippo, the consultant outlined that the project would provide a way for the community to reduce the level of its dependence as well as its activities on the forest through the provision of starter funds and cattle (goats) for multiplication and sale as income generation activities. In response to this assertion, the community representatives in the consultation said that they would rather engage in something that was more sustainable and that would benefit the entire community instead of just a few persons. The participants then intimated that land would not be an issue in the implementation of the project so they would rather a community peanut farm. Participants represented by each community took a decision by choosing the cultivation of 10 acres each for peanut farming and goat farming as alternative livelihood activities instead of few of them having a starter fund which is not sustainable. The joint meeting brought together equal number of participants from Jueh and Gbokon There were 20 participants at the meeting and each community brought 10 persons which included 3females, 3youths, 3elders and a clergyman.

The predominant livelihood activities in both communities and the surrounding villages are, mining and hunting. A large percentage of the population in that area are engaged in alluvial gold mining which in and of itself mostly accounts for the destruction of the landscape and vegetation of the forest – the habitat of the pigmy hippo. Hunting which is second, affects mainly the population of pygmy hippos in the area. The activities, goat multiplication and peanut farming, the participants intimated will help reduce the pressure of mining and hunting in the community as well as generate income for their sustenance. As we are aware, the duration of peanut farm is three months, and good

number of our population eat peanuts besides 70% or more of the peanuts consumed in our country comes from Guinea.



*THE FACILITATER AT THE IN JUEH DURING THE W/SHOP*



*PARTICIPANT HAVING BREAK FAST BEFORE THE WORKSHOP*



*THE PROJECT PLANNER AT THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH IN GBOKON*

***Holding of Awareness Workshop in Gbokon and Jueh:***

The awareness workshop was carried-out in the Jueh and Gbokon Communities respectively with 40 participants even though there were many observers. It provided education and outreach on the need and benefits of biodiversity conservation, promoted the conservation, preservation and protection of endangered species such as the pygmy hippos in their natural environment. The workshop which was held on January 18 and 19 2014 respectively in Jueh and Gbokon, Rivercess County, is an initiative funded by UNDP under the GEF/SGP project to provide awareness on the need and benefits of conserving one of the world's most extraordinary threatened creature: the pygmy hippo. The residents of the both communities rely primarily on elicit mining, and hunting for livelihood and sustenance.

The UNDP funded "Community Conservation Project" aims to assist in increasing local communities' awareness on the importance of natural resource management; especially conservation of pygmy hippopotamus. The project initially targeted Senkwehn and Cestos in Sine and Rivercess but due to reduction in the budget, GRASS targets Cestos in Rivercess County, which includes two local communities, Jueh and Gbokon



and their surrounding villages and towns. These communities are near the bank of the cestus especially Gbokon.

It further creates a platform to equip stakeholders, especially local communities with the relevant technical skills/tools and basic resources so that they will generate the interest to ensure the wise use, conservation and sustainable management of the natural resources of the forest. Also, it aimed to improve partnership and communication between GRASS and forest edge communities to ensure a collaborative effort that will enhance the protection of pygmy hippos *in the surrounding forest ecosystem*

The topics treated at the awareness workshop are as follows;

- Understanding what pygmy hippo is.
- Why should it be conserved?
- The benefits or values of its conservation
- The IUCN categorization of threatened species
- The workshop was designed to have achieved the below objectives from its cross section of participants:
- Conservation and the rationale to conserving natures
- The biology and ecology related to pygmy hippos
- Close population of hippos at both global/regional and national levels
- Related threats to pygmy hippos
- The kind of hippo needing conservation

During this phase of his elaboration, the consultant did an in-depth facilitation underscoring that species are conserved to ensure sustainability or their perpetual availability to current and future generations and that every country/town/community has the moral responsibility to ensure the conservation and rational use of its biological resources.

The facilitator further asserted that in order to achieve this, protecting individual species of conservation concern or protecting places of high threat or irreplaceability, is important.

The facilitation also covered the following topics as part of the awareness rising for the local residents:

The history and life process of pygmy hippo

Emphasis on their Biology and Ecology

As many over 85% of the participants did not know that pygmy hippo is one of the endangered species according to the IUCN Red List of threatened species. He further informed participants that the ranking was largely due to hunting of hippos and destruction and fragmentation of their natural habitats. He said there is an urgent need of protection by everyone particularly local community dwellers who are the direct drivers of change of the species threat status.

The need to conserve pygmy hippos was also realized in their reproductive process. They became educated that pygmy hippo takes 184-204 days gestation period to reproduce one or two offspring. Their long time multiplicity needs collaborative and effective efforts to ensure an increase in their population and safeguard their habitat to prevent their extinction. They were further informed that the habitat of pygmy hippos is the primary rainforest near swamps, marshes or rivers. Hippos are herbivorous and forage in rainforest ecosystem for their nutrition requirements.

An overview of the global outlook of the species was presented as well as statistical analysis of its population status in Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. The challenges and threats presented provided buttressed need to protect pygmy hippo remaining population and habitats through capacity building and awareness.

### ***Questions asked during the workshop***

- If we should protect pygmy hippos, what will be the benefits to our communities?
- If I only have a cup of rice left home and I'm fortunate to meet a pygmy hippo caught by my trap, what should I do?
- Who takes responsibility if my crops are damaged by a pygmy hippo?
- What should we do to prevent pygmy from damaging our crops?

However, the participants were told that the purpose of the workshop was to create awareness on the threatened status of the Pygmy hippo, the benefits and need of its conservation. And that lessons learnt is anticipated to provide an understanding of the state of pygmy hippo in the surrounding forest of the targeted communities, the major threats they face and priorities for management action.

While it is critical to consider these concerns, communities were made to be aware that wildlife conservation is a law of the republic and that communities can work together to address concerns affecting them owed to wildlife.

Similarly, the initiative will build and enhance participating communities' capacity in basic short-term agricultural skills via a participative approach that stimulates dialogue, encourages cooperation, builds trust and generate enthusiasm for conservation.

### ***Project Activities Uncompleted***

As mentioned above, GRASS together with the community was able to complete some of the activities in the project document while the some are still ongoing, amongst which are; the procurement and distribution of livestock to the both communities. GRASS needs to also procure and distribute planting materials to both communities so as to carry-out the peanut cultivation. As part of the project activities, the community dwellers of Jueh and Gbokon will benefit from several training so as to enhance their capacity to carry-out and manage the project properly. Some of the trainings earmarks are, training of community members in new farming method as relates to peanut cultivation. A group must have a team of leader to provide direction and they will need leadership training so as effectively conduct the affairs of the group. In the absence of good leadership the project is bind to fail. The group will also have members who will be charge with the responsibility to market the produce and this group of people will be trained in both leadership and basics book-keeping. GRASS will seek the expertise of some professionals to produce simple and easy to read training materials in to vegetable production. This document when produced will help both communities to conduct their own activity or cultivate their own plot of land to grow vegetable. As we are aware monitoring of the project is a key component especially if good result is to be obtained, therefore, this part of the project activity is an ongoing exercise.

### ***Problems or Difficulties Encountered During Reporting Period***

There are several challenges but prominent amongst them is the issue of mindset of the locals as they are used to elicit mining. To have them turn to alternative livelihood activities is a challenge since the process of behavior change happens over time. Even though mining is not sustainable, both communities see it as a way of making quick income to service their habits. Therefore, they prefer going on the mine every day to doing different activities even if the new activity is sustainable. The challenge issue is the project initially was to cover two counties, Cestos in Rivercess and Sankenwehn in Sine Counties. Due the reduction in the budget GRASS is only covering Rivercess County which includes, Jueh and Gbokon Communities.

Another issue of difficulty was getting to the communities of intervention. Due to the condition of the road to these communities, the cost of transportation is often high and fewer vehicles are on road. Alternately, the wear and tear of the organization's vehicle is

enormous and the cost of repairs and maintenance is high. This has presented a challenge to regular monitoring in the communities.

### ***How These Have Problems/Difficulties Been Addressed***

To mitigate this challenge the community was led through a critical analysis of the effects of their activities on the natural environment and how it will impact them in the long run during the holding of the Community Driven Development Consultation and the awareness raising workshops. It was from the conduct of these meetings that communities got to understand that mining could not help them in a substantial and sustainable way. Some of these young men and women had been residing in these communities for more than seven years but yet cannot show anything that they have achieved.

To deal with the transportation difficulty, GRASS planned monitoring trips during days in the week that more vehicles were on the road because of the weekly markets in that area. Another way, we have dealt with the issue is to make joint trips instead of individual project trips but the drawback to this is that it took other project team members to sites that they would not have visited and takes more time as they have to wait for their colleagues to finish their work before proceeding to their own communities.

### ***Assessment of Project Achievements to date based on the indicators of Project Work Plan***

Coming out of the implementation of the activities mentioned supra, the entire community is involved in the alternative livelihood activities. This was done in consultation with the community to ensure community ownership and sustainability as well as to guard against the project acting as a divider in the community. The community is therefore engaged in the both aspects of the livelihood activities. A strategy was then devised by the communities with GRASS staff facilitating to take the first year to multiply the animals as the first phase and then the second phase will be to distribute the goats to households for income generation. The income from the peanuts farm will be used to engage in communal activities which would otherwise cause individual members of the community to expend income.

It is quite early in a behavior change project to begin to see concrete changes in people's behavior. However, there are anecdotal evidence that knowledge about the endangerment of the pygmy hippo is being assimilated in the communities from the questions they asked during and after the awareness workshops.

# of persons demonstrating sustainable use of forest resources

Since the communities are predominantly mining and hunting communities, about 75% of 317 of the community dwellers are still carry-out mining activity but in principle once they see the benefit from their first harvest there will be an automatic change from mining which is heavily impacting the land negatively.

# of persons demonstrating knowledge on the endangerment of the pygmy hippo

After all the training and awareness workshops both communities and its surroundings are demonstrating knowledge on the endangerment of the pygmy hippo by creating awareness into other communities that did not attend the these meetings and training. About 35% of hunting are now slowing down on hunting.

# And types of actions taken by community in the use of forest resources

About 73% of 317 of population of both community dwellers are now working in a new livelihood activity that is more sustainable evidenced by slowing down on mining

### ***Activities Yet to Complete during the Reporting Period***

The activities that are yet outstanding are as follows:

Procurement and distribution of livestock (ongoing)

Procurement of planting materials (seed)

Training on managing livelihood and basic bookkeeping

Second phase of awareness workshop for communities

Monitoring (ongoing)

### ***Request for Revision of Project***

GRASS is requesting a revision of the project based on the community's decision from the consultation held with them that they would prefer to embark on a peanut farm and goat multiplication which will benefit the entire community. During that consultation, the communities decided that in order to do that they would use the first year to do multiplication of the goats and then the second for distribution to households. They then asked GRASS to continue their engagement with the communities beyond the life of the project.