

# Rapid Food and Livelihoods Security Assessment

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**  
**CONTENTS**

**PAGE**

TABLE OF CONTENTS..... 1

*HIGHLIGHTS*..... 2

1. Background ..... 4

2. Objectives and Assumptions ..... 4

3. Methodology..... 5

4. Results ..... 6

    4.1. Impact on Livelihoods ..... 6

    4.2. Market Impacts ..... 8

    4.3. Support and Coping ..... 9

    4.4. Community-proposed Solutions ..... 10

5. Conclusions and Recommendations ..... 10

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## HIGHLIGHTS

The 2014 outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) has affected nearly the whole region of West Africa, slowing the recently growing momentum of the region's economic prospects. The impacts of EVD go well beyond the health implications, and that livelihoods have been for many months to come.

In urban areas, the flow of commodities in the quarantined communities was heavily restricted. For rural areas, entire communities which reported cases of EVD were stigmatized and transactions with other areas were limited out of fear of disease transmission. The cost of transportation also rose, constituting an additional barrier to trade.

As reported by the World Bank, the largest economic effects of the crisis have been those linked to changes in behavior, either as part of government-imposed aversion measures or driven by fear resulting in a major drop in employment, income, and demand for goods and services. Quarantines, road blocks, and the shutting of markets for 8-10 weeks served to reduce the quantities of some items in some markets.

The overall objective of the study was to assess the impact of the ongoing EDV crisis on the food and livelihood security of a cross section of the Liberian population. The study collected predominantly qualitative community perceptions.

**Petty trading** was perceived to be the most severely affected livelihood by the EVD crisis, due to the general economic slowdown, increased transportation costs and infection aversion measures put into place between August and November. Consumers and traders described how the prices for some products have increased while the customer base has dramatically declined – there are fewer customers overall and they are spending less.

**Wage labor** in the private sector has also been seriously affected by the crisis with significant layoffs in many sectors. Many jobs were particularly lost in the education sector as result of schools being closed and because private home-based instruction, a form of supplemental income for teachers, has also been forbidden by the Ministry of Education as part of the EVD aversion measures.

**Agriculture** was cited as being among the most heavily affected livelihoods, particularly in the communities of Bomi County. The impact was mainly related to the loss of buyers rather than on agricultural production, as was initially feared. Middlemen were no longer coming to the farm gate resulting in the loss of perishable products and incomes for farmers. Some farmers reported to have reduced the size of the field they are cultivating in response to the decline in the market for their products and the ban on collective work on agricultural fields. There is therefore a strong possibility that many farmers will find it difficult to buy seeds for the next planting season.

**Casual labor** was reported to have been seriously impacted by EVD as many of the most vulnerable to food insecurity and poverty depend on casual labor as their primary income source. With the general economic decline and lower cash flows the demand for casual labor has declined significantly.

**Fishing** was heavily impacted by EVD in the communities of West Point and New Kru Town of Monrovia. These communities have a relatively large number of small scale fishermen who were prevented from fishing as a result of the curfew measures put in place; much of the fishing takes place during the night.

Other groups mentioned as being affected are **market cook shop women, hairdressers** (aversion to contact), and **taxi drivers**. The general economic decline has reduced the number of customers and their ability to pay. Cooking bush meat was a strategy used in most cook shops to maximize profits

and attract customers; however the ban on the sale and consumption of bush meat has forced cook shops to stop including this relatively cheap form of protein.

The most common form of support mentioned by the communities consulted was the provision of buckets, chlorine and soap, primarily by various NGOs and some medical support including the provision of anti-malarial tablets. WFP provided rice, beans and oil. Cash assistance was reported to have been distributed in Carysburg by a politician and in Tubmanburg as part of the Government of Liberia social safety net program.

The most commonly cited community problems were related to water, sanitation and hygiene. Multiple informants from most communities mentioned the lack of latrines as being a major community problem. All communities described the need for more hand pumps and safe drinking water. Communities showed a willingness to contribute labor and materials for any WASH-related projects.

The need to increase access to cash and credit via micro loans to restart or reinvigorate livelihood activities was brought up in most communities. This was suggested as the most relevant approach to support petty traders and small businesses in overcoming the impacts of the EVD crisis by injecting cash into communities to stimulate markets. Other needs related to health and the need for clinics in the community; education and the need to start school again; food and the need to improve purchasing power and to increase home production.

The study recommends:

- ✓ Injection of cash into communities to improve purchasing power thereby improving food consumption and reinvigorating market activity and improving incomes of market traders
- ✓ Improving access to micro loans in the community by providing financial and technical support to grassroots savings and loan groups
- ✓ Integration of livelihood-based responses to improved WASH outcomes for improved EVD preparedness and to improved household health and nutrition promotion. .
- ✓ Ensuring sufficient level of community involvement and contribution to any intervention, according to the ability and capacity of the target population
- ✓ Targeting communities in other areas which before the crisis were known to be highly vulnerable to Food and Nutrition Security.
- ✓ Support with agriculture extension and inputs to mitigate possibility of food shortage/ less local production in the upcoming dry season as a result as lack of seeds and tools.
- ✓ Increasing options for alternatives to bush meat, both as a source of protein and as a livelihood (i.e. hunting and/or preparing bush meat)
- ✓ Ensuring that any emergency intervention does not undermine medium and longer term development goals, nor does it stimulate intra-community tensions
- ✓ Ensuring that any intervention is well coordinated with the Government of Liberia's social safety net strategy and supports county government to set up EVD risk management strategies.

## 1. Background

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The 2014 outbreak of the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) has affected nearly the whole region of West Africa, slowing the recently growing momentum of the region's economic prospects. It has become increasingly clear that the impacts of EVD go well beyond the health implications, and that livelihoods have been and will continue to be affected for many months to come. Government revenues have decreased while the need to spend precious financial resources to address the health crisis remains, leaving other sectors with fewer resources to deal with the knock on effects of the EVD crisis.

Following a decrease in the rate of new infections countrywide, on 12 November 2014 the Government of Liberia (GoL) lifted the state of emergency, and ended the suspension on weekly markets, quarantine imposed on highly affected counties, and extended the curfew restrictions by one hour from 11pm to midnight. Nonetheless schools remain closed and private and public institutions workers sent home as part of measures to suppress the spread of the EVD are yet to resume their work.

In urban areas, the flow of commodities in the quarantined communities was heavily restricted and traders were restricted access to some of the quarantined areas. In some cases, makeshift markets were created in and around the quarantined perimeter. For rural areas, entire communities which reported cases of EVD were stigmatized and transactions with other areas were limited out of fear of disease transmission. The cost of transportation also rose, constituting an additional barrier to trade. However transportation costs are expected to go down as global oil prices are steadily declining.

As the World Bank reports<sup>1</sup>, the largest economic effects of the crisis have not been direct costs related to mortality, morbidity, caregiving, and the associated losses in working days, but those resulting from changes in behavior, either as part of government-imposed aversion measures or driven by fear. These new behaviors have resulted in a pervasive drop in employment, income, and demand for goods and services.

As infection rates continue to decline in Liberia and awareness increases of the impacts of the EVD crisis on livelihoods and food and nutrition security, an increasing number of stakeholders are turning attention towards what Liberians may be facing in the aftermath of the crisis. To this effect, ACF and WHH launched a qualitative assessment to examine the impacts of the EVD crisis on food and livelihood security.

## 2. Objectives and Assumptions

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With the aim of complementing existing quantitative, country wide assessments, the overall objective of the study was to assess the impact of the ongoing EDV crisis on the food and livelihood security of a cross section of the Liberian population. This rapid assessment collected predominantly qualitative community perceptions and did not use tools to collect quantitative household level data. Given the launch of the World Food Programme (WFP) mobile data collection on coping

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<sup>1</sup> The Economic Impact of the 2014 Ebola Epidemic: Short and Medium Term Estimates for West Africa, The World Bank Group, October 7, 2014

strategies at household level<sup>2</sup> and the existing household level information in the Mercy Corps report on economic impact on markets<sup>3</sup>, it was not deemed necessary to attempt any household level data collection.

From previous WFP comprehensive food security and nutrition security surveys, it is clear that food insecurity and poverty are highly correlated. Household spend a large proportion of their income on food (national average was 53% in 2012, but some counties it was as high as 70%<sup>4</sup>) and their food security is highly vulnerable to income shocks as they have very little buffer when their purchasing power is eroded. Therefore, this assessment considers the impacts on income, on physical and economic access to food, and on external and internal support mechanisms as a way to understand potential impacts of the EVD-driven economic crisis on food security.

The specific objectives of this assessment included:

- 1) Identify and understand the impacts of the EVD crisis on specific livelihood groups
- 2) Identify impacts of EVD on the marketplace for both market traders and consumers
- 3) Understand community perceptions on how economic and physical food access has been impacted by EVD
- 4) Determine the type and access to various forms of support (local, national, international) and understand what coping mechanisms have been affected

### 3. Methodology

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This assessment was conducted in urban and peri-urban areas of Greater Monrovia (Montserrado County) and urban and semi-rural areas in Bomi County. Most of the communities consulted were considered as EVD hotspots while others did not have any cases of infection. Two teams of nine people conducted the assessment concurrently in Montserrado and Bomi Counties. A total of seven communities, four in Montserrado and three in Bomi, were selected for this qualitative assessment.

County	District	Locality	Type
Montserrado	Greater Monrovia	New Kru Town	Peri-urban
Montserrado	Careysburg	Careysburg	Peri-urban
Montserrado	Greater Monrovia	Fiamah	Urban
Montserrado	Greater Monrovia	West Point	Urban
Bomi	Senjey	Tubmanburg (Harmon Hill)	Urban
Bomi	Dowein	Sastown	Semi-rural
Bomi	Dowein	Dorlelah	Semi-rural

The assessment was intended to provide a more in depth, rich, and qualitative understanding of the effects of EVD on the food security status of people who have been impacted directly or indirectly by

<sup>2</sup> <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp269463.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/economic-impact-ebola-crisis-select-liberian-markets>

<sup>4</sup> <http://foodsecuritycluster.net/document/wfp-liberia-comprehensive-food-security-and-nutrition-survey-cfsns-june-2013>



the crisis. The perspectives of the already poor and vulnerable were especially sought out, and the perspectives of petty traders, retailers and wholesalers in the local markets, as well as those of community leaders were included in the assessment.

This qualitative assessment included separate focus group discussions with men, women, and youth, key informant interviews with community leaders and market traders, as well as semi-structured community observations. A total of 21 focus group discussions, 13 community leader interviews, 15 wholesalers and 21 retailer/petty trader interviews, and seven structured observations were conducted. The data collection took place over a period of six days in mid-December, including one day for training and one day for testing the assessment tools.

## 4. Results

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While the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions touched upon a wide range of topics, certain topics yielded richer information. The results of the assessment will be presented in the following four main headings: Impacts on Livelihoods; Market Impacts; Support and Coping; and Community-proposed Solutions.

### 4.1. Impact on Livelihoods

Petty trading, wage labor, and agriculture were the most often cited livelihoods which have been the most affected by the EVD crisis.

**Petty trading** was perceived to be the most severely affected livelihood by the EVD crisis, primarily due to the general economic slowdown and infection aversion measures put into place between August and November. Consumers and traders alike described how the prices for some products have increased while the customer base has dramatically declined – there are fewer customers overall and they are spending less. As a result of the increasingly diminished profits which were very low to begin with some petty traders, particularly those who peddle food, have consumed their business capital and currently do not have a way to replace it. Other factors negatively impacting on petty trading include the increase in transportation (reported perceived median increase of 40-45%), stigmatization of entire communities which have had EVD-infected members, movement restrictions of people and goods, and even a loss of buyers due to some people reportedly moving out of the community. While profit margins of sold products have been reduced, petty traders explain that the primary factor affecting their business and livelihood is that goods now take much longer to sell, so they are holding on to stock for longer periods and have a much lower turnover rates which is depressing their overall income. Furthermore, a general lack of credit and loan facilities under normal conditions places significant barriers on petty traders in terms of effective shock management, a situation which is even further constrained by the EVD crisis. While most vendors were optimistic that things would start to improve in early 2015, most were similarly pessimistic about the length of time to fully recover with many estimating that it would take six to twelve months. A number of vendors cited the long timeframe needed to recover from debts and rebuild business capital.

**Wage labor** in the private sector has also been seriously affected by the crisis. In most interviews and focus group discussions the topic of job loss was brought up, particularly jobs in the education

sector. This is a result of schools being closed and because private home-based instruction, a form of supplemental income for teachers, has also been forbidden by the Ministry of Education as part of the EVD aversion measures. There were reportedly significant layoffs in other sectors as well. There are very minimal legal protections for employees within the private sector, the labor market is not well regulated or monitored, and the vast majority of Liberian workers are informally employed. For these reasons many employees have been dismissed from one day to the next without any compensation and no options for recourse. Furthermore, those residing in EVD hotspots found themselves more vulnerable to losing their jobs due to general fears and stigmatization. For instance, many domestic workers coming from communities known to have had many cases of EVD were let go by their employers. Others who worked night shifts also found it difficult to reach their workplace given the curfew put in place between August and November.

**Agriculture** was also cited as being among the most heavily affected livelihoods, particularly in the communities of Bomi County. However the initial fears of significant impacts on agriculture production have not been borne out. The most significant impact on agricultural livelihoods has been the loss of buyers rather than on agricultural production, as was initially feared. As a result of the crisis, middlemen who normally came to the farm gate to purchase agricultural products from farmers were no longer coming, which resulted in the loss of perishable products and incomes for farmers. Some farmers reported to have reduced the size of the field they are cultivating in response to the decline in the market for their products. Furthermore, the size of plots which could be cultivated was reduced as a result of the ban on collective work on agricultural fields. Availability of labour for harvesting was therefore constrained. This combined with lower sales figures will likely make it more difficult for farmers to buy seeds for the next planting season. The impact of this on food security will likely be more evident in March – April, the normal time for harvesting vegetables. The movement restrictions also had a negative impact on agricultural livelihoods as it not only prevented middlemen from coming to the farms but also prevented farmers from venturing out to seek buyers for their products. Furthermore, some interviewees described how farmers were less inclined to exert themselves in the fields out of increased fears of getting ill, either with EVD or another disease which could be confused for Ebola.

**Casual labor** is another livelihood which was seriously impacted by EVD, and while it was not among the top three most affected livelihood groups, many of the most vulnerable to food insecurity and poverty depend on casual labor as their primary income source. With the general economic decline and lower cash flows for non-essential goods and services, the demand for casual labor has declined significantly. The reduction of the foreign ships docking at the Freeport of Monrovia and the reduction in the volume of goods imported has had a significant impact on the demand for casual laborers to offload the goods. The situation is similar for those casual workers stationed at strategic markets such as Red Light, Duala, and Waterside waiting to load/offload container trucks. As casual laborers are largely unskilled workers, they have few alternative options to earn an income. Furthermore, there is an increase in numbers of men who are turning to casual labor due to a lack of other employment opportunities thereby creating more demand for fewer and fewer casual labor opportunities.

**Fishing** was heavily impacted by EVD in the communities of West Point and New Kru Town of Monrovia. Both of these communities have a relatively large number of small scale fishermen who



were prevented from fishing as a result of the curfew measures put in place since much of the fishing takes place during the night and very early hours of the morning. Additionally many young men who normally worked on large fishing boats operated by Ghanaian fishermen lost their employment when the state of emergency and quarantine was called. Along with the reduction in fishing activities came a concomitant reduction in the volume of catch, which had knock on effects on related activities such as offloading, processing, and vending of fish. **Livestock** production, by comparison, has been relatively less affected and for the most part was not deemed to be among the most affected livelihoods in the communities consulted in this assessment.

Other groups mentioned as being affected are **market cook shop women, hairdressers, and taxi drivers**. The general economic decline has reduced the number of customers and their ability to pay. Cooking bush meat was a strategy used in most cook shops to maximize profits and attract customers, however the ban on the sale and consumption of bush meat has forced cook shops to stop including this relatively cheap form of protein and include more costly meat (usually in lower quantities). The general public is increasingly wary of cook shops out of fears that they secretly continue to mix in bush meat. Street hairdressers have been affected out of fear of EVD transmission owing to the personal contact required of the job. One community cited a case of infection between a hairdresser and her client. The ban on the number of people permitted in a car taxi and motorcycle taxi has meant that taxi drivers have both increased the per passenger cost and have taken a hit to their overall income. Additionally, as a result of the greater cost per trip per passenger there are fewer passengers than before. Opinions were mixed on the degree of negative impact on taxi drivers as some them increased their fares albeit illegally.

#### *4.2. Market Impacts*

Again, the impacts on the market as described by the key informants, focus group discussion participants, and market vendors, are predominantly the result of the measures put in place by the Government of Liberia in order to reduce the risk of EVD transmission. Quarantines, road blocks, and the shutting of markets for 8-10 weeks served to reduce the quantities of some items in some markets. During the assessment many vendors stated that peppers were not available in the same quantities as normal, and some vendors also noted that potatoes, eddoes, ground nuts, and eggs were also not available in the same quantities as normal. The assessment did not aim to quantify the shortages, however visual observation in the market places revealed that these items were present in the markets, if not in the same quantity as normal.

Almost invariably, market vendors described how there was a significant decrease in the number of clients and the volumes they purchase, stating that the main reason is a serious decline in customer purchasing power. In the communities in Bomi County it was suggested that some people have migrated out of the region, also contributing to the reduction in the number of customers. There were mixed opinions on if there were fewer or more vendors, and some suggested that vendors who normally paid the small fees required to sell in the covered sections of the markets have instead moved to the streets where they do not have to pay the same fees.

There were also mixed reports from vendors on recent changes to their working hours. Some explained that they now close earlier than normal because there are often no customers after about 15:00, whereas others described how they work longer hours now because it takes much more time

to sell the products they have now compared to before the crisis. Without exception, all vendors reported that their incomes had been reduced with the crisis. Approximately half stated that their incomes had significantly decreased and the other half said that their incomes had slightly decreased.

Market prices appear to have increased almost universally; however it is difficult to attribute this directly to the EVD crisis as some of the increase may be normal inflation linked to seasonality, such as the cost of palm oil which usually rises during the rainy season, or only indirectly related to the crisis as a result of overall EVD-driven inflation and the weakening of the Liberian Dollar against the US Dollar. According to the vendors interviewed, the prices for rice and vegetable oil have increased slightly and they are less available in the markets in roughly the same quantities, prices for palm oil and charcoal have increased moderately and palm oil is less available while the availability of charcoal has not changed. Waterside market which supplies smaller markets was closed for 21 days leading to depressed supply of some basic commodities e.g. rice and vegetables. Restriction of movement of local communities curtailed the supply of vegetables from local sources. There has been no apparent change in the price or availability of so-called “boney fish”, the most common and accessible fish in Liberian markets.

For the most part, vendors did not change their sources for the products they sell, except for a slight shift in favor of Red Light market and away from buying directly from farmers. Most of the vendors in Bomi County buy their products from Duallah market in Monrovia, and this has not changed since the crisis. The cost of transportation, however, has increased significantly according to some vendors. Some claim that the price of a trip has doubled since the crisis, whereas the median increase is estimated by vendors at approximately 40-45%. However, as already pointed out it is expected that this will soon be reversed as local consumers start to benefit from the current downward trend in global oil prices.

### *4.3. Support and Coping*

The most common form of support mentioned by the communities consulted was the provision of buckets, chlorine and soap, primarily by various NGOs. Some medical support was mentioned including the provision of anti-malarial tablets. Some community members mentioned the irregular provision of rice, beans and oil by WFP, and a few others mentioned food being distributed by other organizations in the preceding months. Only two focus groups, one in Carysburg and one in Tubmanburg, cited that cash assistance had been distributed; in Carysburg by a politician and in Tubmanburg as part of the Government of Liberia social safety net program.

With regards to local community-driven support, nearly all communities described how they do what they can for those in need but the current crisis has affected most people. As there are more people in need and fewer resources to share, normal social support is constrained. This situation is placing additional pressures on the social fabric of a country which was already extremely poor and food insecure, and has only relatively recently emerged from a long civil war. Individual gardening or coal burning have become more prominent because of the fear of contracting EVD through working as a group.

Not unexpectedly, the coping strategies which are being employed more frequently and by a wider population are, in order of importance, 1) depending on less expensive food e.g. more cassava or cassava products and less protein and vegetables; 2) reducing the number of meals; 3) borrowing

food or money for food; and 4) limiting portion size. The reduction in incomes has played a role in the increased adoption of these coping strategies.

#### *4.4. Community-proposed Solutions*

As part of the assessment, communities were asked about what they saw as their most critical problems and what they envision they can do for themselves to address these problems. At almost double that of any other theme, the most commonly cited community problems were related to water, sanitation and hygiene. Multiple informants from all communities, with the exception of West Point in Monrovia, mentioned the lack of latrines as being a major community problem. It should be noted, however, that poor sanitation and hygiene conditions are a perennial issue in West Point. The lack of latrines was mentioned in New Kru Town (Monrovia) and Tubmanburg (Bomi County) by almost all of the focus groups and key informants. All communities, including West Point, also described the need for more hand pumps and safe drinking water. Communities showed a willingness to contribute labor and materials for any WASH-related projects.

The need to increase access to cash and credit via micro loans to restart or reinvigorate livelihood activities was brought up in most communities by multiple key informants and focus groups. It was repeatedly suggested as the most relevant approach to support petty traders and small businesses in overcoming the impacts of the EVD crisis by injecting cash into communities to stimulate markets.

Other themes which were touched upon by the assessment participants were: health and the need for clinics in the community; education and the need to start school again; food and the need to improve purchasing power and to increase home production.

### *5. Conclusions and Recommendations*

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- ✓ The EVD health crisis has also become a livelihood crisis, affecting wide sections of the Liberian population reducing the few resources people once had
- ✓ The three most affected livelihood groups, according to the perceptions of community members are 1) petty trading 2) wage labor, and 3) agriculture
- ✓ Other affected income generation activities are casual labor, fishing, market cook shops, hairdressing, taxi driving
- ✓ The assessment confirms the World Bank conclusion that the EVD aversion measures (quarantine, road blocks, curfew) have had the most significant impact on livelihoods
- ✓ A general economic slowdown, along with EVD-related fears have had a significant impact on the income earning potential of the most vulnerable, including those engaged in informal work
- ✓ The purchasing power of consumers is depressed and market activity has stagnated, including for foodstuffs
- ✓ Vendors have been particularly affected by a lack of customers, increased cost of transportation, and the disruption in marketing for 8-10 weeks due to the market closure ordered by the Government of Liberia
- ✓ As many in Liberia were already living on the razor's edge, the economic fallout of the EVD crisis has hit the most vulnerable particularly hard

- ✓ Food supplies are generally adequate with a minor decline in supply in the markets for some items. However there is a shift towards consuming less expensive food and limiting on dietary diversity
- ✓ External assistance provided to communities has focused on EVD-related hygiene items such as buckets, chlorine and soap; little has been provided yet to assist communities to recover economically from the shock of the epidemic
- ✓ The social fabric is being stretched as people have even fewer resources to provide social support to others
- ✓ Communities see a lack of latrines and safe drinking water as among their biggest problems, yet they see WASH-related public works as the realm in which they can actively contribute towards improvement
- ✓ Communities are optimistic about the possibilities to revive their livelihood activities but cite the need for micro-loans in order to achieve this  
*The recommendations are both emergency and early recovery focused*
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Inject cash into communities to improve purchasing power thereby improving food consumption and reinvigorating market activity and improving incomes of market traders
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Improve access to micro loans in the community by providing financial and technical support to grassroots savings and loan groups
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Integrate livelihood-based responses to improved WASH outcomes for improved EVD preparedness and to improved household health and nutrition promotion. .
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Ensure sufficient level of community involvement and contribution to any intervention, according to the ability and capacity of the target population
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Any future intervention should not target only communities that had cases of EVD but other areas which before the crisis were known to be highly vulnerable to Food and Nutrition Security.
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Support with agriculture extension and inputs to mitigate possibility of food shortage/ less local production in the upcoming dry season as a result as lack of seeds and tools.
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Increase options for alternatives to bush meat, both as a source of protein and as a livelihood (i.e. hunting and/or preparing bush meat)
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Ensure that any emergency intervention does not undermine medium and longer term development goals, nor does it stimulate intra-community tensions
- ✓ **RECOMMENDATION:** Ensure that any intervention is well coordinated with the Government of Liberia's social safety net strategy and supports county government to set up EVD risk management strategies.