

A hidden natural rubber giant

By VIJAY MAIRA

GENERAL MANAGER, LIBERIAN AGRICULTURAL COMPANY

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The Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC) is Liberia's second largest natural rubber plantation and was established in 1959 by UNIROYAL Inc., an American company.

LAC is nestled in the jungle heartland of Grand Bassa County and has had a history of phenomenal growth and transformation. While there have been ownership changes LAC has remained true to its founding ethos of being the plantation where nature is allowed to unleash its beauty, wildlife is preserved and the company's workers and community residents are valued.

A visitor who travels to LAC for the first time would experience breadth-taking greenery and vegetation within a developed area of more than 56,000 acres that includes trees, hills, valleys, swamps, protected wetlands, residential areas as well as plantation and industrial offices. LAC is not only a major agricultural company active in carrying out a robust program of rejuvenating and expanding the plantation but also runs an international research and development department that is charged with producing and selecting clones for the plantation.

LAC's has invested over US \$50 million in the past ten years in housing and school improvements for workers, the provision of medical facilities and the construction of modern water and waste systems. LAC continuously carries out aggressive outreach and service delivery programs to its host communities and also consistently meets its tax obligations to the government of Liberia.

LAC provides modern educational, health, and recreational facilities to its approximately 5,000 workers and their 30,000 dependents. The company operates a 70-bed hospital which serves workers, their dependents, citizens and residents of concession communities. LAC also runs a strong family planning program, and operates 11 mobile clinics that are available to inhabitants of all the camps and its surroundings.

LAC runs one of the most successful school systems in Liberia. The company's schools are equipped with modern science and computer laboratories, and a library. There are a total of more than 6,000 students in LAC's elementary, junior, and senior high schools. In recent years, students of the senior high school have scored at the top of the West African Exam (WAEC) which is required for high school graduation

and admission to any post high schools in Liberia and abroad. Several students have benefitted from LAC's scholarship program. Some of the students have returned following the completion of their university studies to work for the company in middle management and managerial positions.

LAC also focuses on the physical and athletic development of its workers and their families. The company has a sports department which supervises its soccer team, LAC Defenders. For several years, the team has dominated local sports in District No. 3 in Grand Bassa County, and is a feeder club to the county's soccer team which competes in annual nationwide competitions.

LAC has also established entertainment and recreational centres in its camps, including the staff swimming pool and club recreational centre, both nestled at the top of a hill overlooking a vast expanse of the plantation. The company also supports a staff radio station on 95.1 FM, which broadcasts content and programs that are uncensored or unsupervised by the management.

To enable its female workers and spouses of its staff and plantation workers plan for better lives and future retirement, LAC has hired full time staff responsible for providing training and mentorship for entrepreneurial development of the women and the youth. The program is generating interest among workers and the youth.

LAC's 54-year history is a history of innovation and transformation designed to improve its operations and the lives and wellbeing of its workers and host communities. The company has hired a social welfare officer to plan and conduct social welfare initiatives for women and other groups in the company's concession area. The program is creating sensitivity and awareness among the targeted groups.

LAC places a premium on safeguarding and protecting its operational and surrounding environments. The company has therefore employed an environmental health and safety officer to monitor and supervise environmental and health conditions at the company's hospital and clinics, as well as ensure compliance with all environment laws and regulations of Liberia and best international practices.

Construction works never cease at LAC. The company regularly rehabilitates its camp and factory facilities. In

recent years, LAC has constructed a market for the LAC Market Women Association. The company has also made financial contribution toward the construction of the town hall in Compound No. 3, which is the largest community near LAC's plantation area.

LAC also repairs and reconditions feeder roads in surrounding communities, and annually rehabilitates and maintains the Buchanan-LAC Highway, which is a major public thoroughfare.

Human capacity development and improvement is at the heart of LAC's personnel recruitment program. The company regularly conducts or pays for periodic training of its local staff and workers.

LAC is an environment friendly company, and adapts smart approaches to preserving the rainforest and the overall environment in its concession area. The company has launched two "green" projects to enhance the quality of its environment. LAC's biomass project, the first of two projects, utilizes wood chips taken from old and felled trees to produce steam for its rubber dryer. The dryer, other components of the processing line and the generators at the company consume a large amount of diesel fuel that is both expensive and in the long term harmful to human health and the environment.

LAC's second project is a hydro project. In 2014, the company plans a hydro plant comprising two turbines with capacity to produce a total of 1.25 megawatt of electric power. When the hydro is completed, the company will no longer need generators for its power supply during the rainy season. And as a result, carbon monoxide emission or discharges will be lower and the LAC environment will be greener and pollution free.

It is significant to note that the costs of all of these programs and initiatives, as well as others not specifically mentioned in this article are borne entirely by Liberian Agricultural Company without any external assistance.

In spite of the considerable progress that LAC has made, the company has not been left unaffected by two disastrous events: the 14-year Liberian civil war – and the 2008 global financial and economic implosion which witnessed the precipitous fall in the price of rubber worldwide. Notwithstanding the challenges, LAC has developed creative managerial approaches to weather these challenges. LAC was one of a few companies, if any, that refused to redundant or layoff workers during the height of the financial and economic meltdown. At the time, the management decided that it would rather suspend the procurement of capital and other assets

than lay off workers. "Our workers are our most valued asset," the management declared.

Because of its belief in its workers, LAC has one of the most liberal benefit and wage systems in Liberia under which workers, in addition to their salaries, receive subsidized bags of rice, free housing, free medical care and free schooling for their families or themselves. LAC also operates a "Night School" program, which is enabling many of its adult and elderly workers to acquire basic literacy education.

LAC also encourages and supports a strong and vibrant workers union. Generally, relative industrial peace prevails on the plantation.

Yet LAC's relationship with host communities has sometimes been a roller coaster ride. The company was challenged and resisted a few years ago when it embarked on an expansion program of its plantation within concession areas granted by the Liberian government. Eventually, LAC was constrained to shelve the expansion initiative.

LAC however continues to make steady progress. The company's annual turnover fluctuates with market prices, often volatile and unpredictable as common to the industry and similar sectors. LAC's yearly production is approximately 15,000 tons. With the country now on the path of sustained peace and security, LAC, Liberia's hidden natural rubber giant, will soon emerge as the rubber giant that transforms this sub-sector – and its host region, providing increased employment, extending education and health services to Liberians distant and poor, preserving the country's rainforest – and giving hope and opportunity to Liberian citizens.

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