

# Rebuilding Liberia's agriculture

## INTERVIEW WITH FLORENCE CHENAWETH

MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA



FLORENCE CHENAWETH holds a Master's degree in agricultural economics and a PhD in land resources from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. In the 1970s, she became Liberia's Minister of Agriculture. She joined the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as its representative in Gambia, West Africa in 1995 and went on to open FAO's first office in South Africa following the end of apartheid. In 2001, Dr Chenaweth was named FAO liaison with the UN in New York City, serving as the link between the agency and the UN General Assembly until 2007.

Women are the foremost farmers in Liberia

### What are the roles and responsibilities of the Ministry of Agriculture?

The sustainability of our economy relies heavily on the agricultural sector. Most of our agricultural infrastructure was destroyed during the civil war. Our mandate at the ministry is to rebuild the agricultural sector so that it can once again take its rightful place as the engine of economic growth. Before the war it was the largest contributor to GDP, and it still is a major contributor. But in addition to attaining self sufficiency in food, one of our priorities is the restoration of animal farming, which suffered heavily during the war.

### What is your strategy for getting the agricultural sector back on its feet?

Firstly, we have a strong focus on encouraging our small farmers. Consolidating food security and enhancing the livelihoods of the farmers is also a top priority. Given that the capacity gap following the war was a staggering 70 per cent, we have implemented numerous training programmes which have transformed our system into a progressive and modern one.

### What have been your main accomplishments the years following the civil war?

Our main crop is rice, but we have unfortunately now become a net importer of rice. Having said that, we have come a long way since 2006, when we imported



100 per cent of our rice. By 2010, 1400 schools were fed using locally produced rice, and in 2011 we achieved self-sufficiency in seed rice. We are training people up to become experts in agricultural science. I have worked in this sector my whole life, educated to the highest levels, and am serving as the Minister of Agriculture for the third time.

### What are the major challenges to the development of the sector in Liberia?

Our electrical supply is currently poor, which is hindering much progress. Our general infrastructure, namely our roads, need vast improvement if we are to reach the farmers in the remote areas. We also have a problem with water-borne diseases, which have gotten worse since the war. Also we must understand that Liberia has the largest tropical rainforests in the region, which is not good for agricultural production. The heavy tropical rain is bad for the soil. Before the 1980s we did have advanced water systems to tackle this, but again it has been destroyed during the civil war. Finally, our financial resources as a country are limited, so there is only so much we can do.

### Given these limitations, how can foreign investment help develop the sector?

It is a mistake not to invest in our agricultural sector. I take my hat off to the many international companies that have already been operating here for years, as they have had to deal with the many challenges I have outlined earlier. Despite these challenges, they have succeeded. We are constantly seeking more investment and we as the government will do all we can to facilitate their business here in Liberia.

### What is for vision for the near future of Liberia's agricultural sector?

I envisage the rebuilding of our previously world-class research institute (CARI), which will become the engine for the growth of this sector. I anticipate the return of the 52 Liberians we have sent abroad for training in agricultural science, and their contribution to the growth of the sector. I dream that within 5 years we will have a modern, 21st century system with advanced water management and other technology, which will allow us to attain complete self sufficiency in our staple crops.