



WEST AFRICA INITIATIVE OF LIBERIA

Liberia



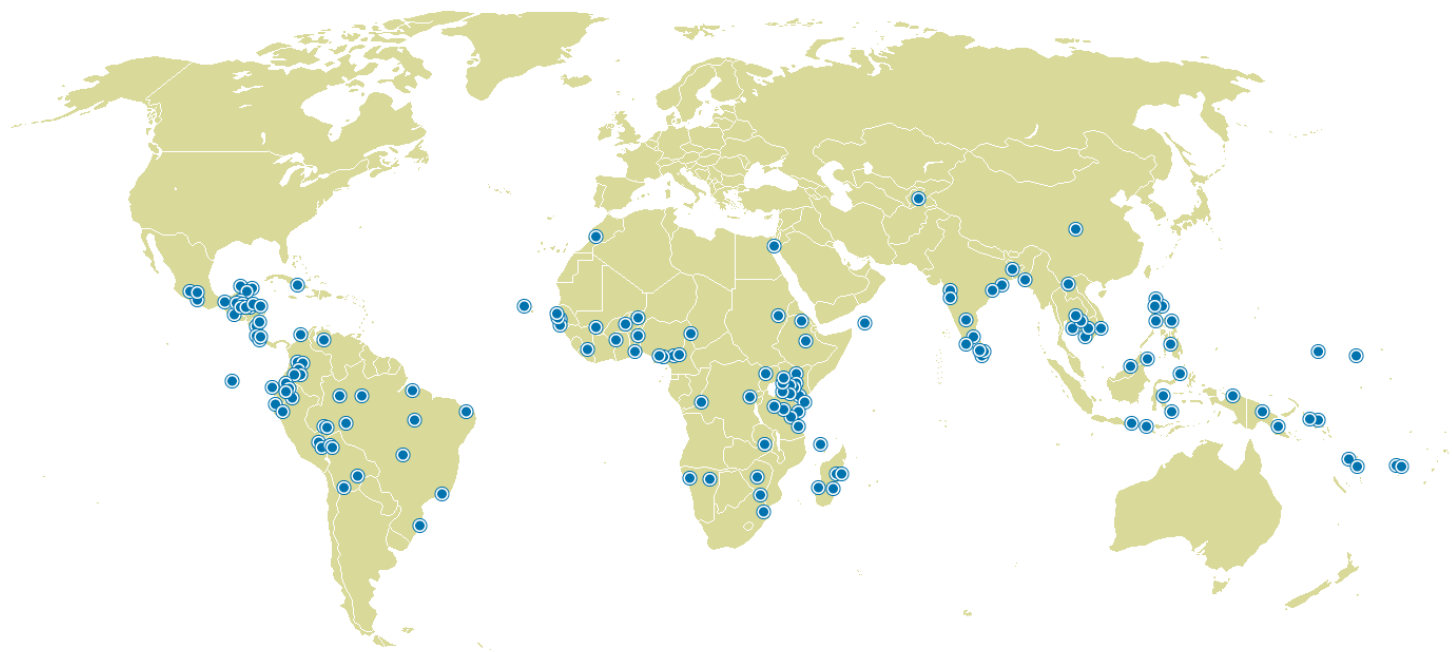
Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to [‘The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize’](#), a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



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PROJECT SUMMARY

West Africa Initiative of Liberia works to develop livelihood options in rural Liberia, giving communities viable alternatives to hunting and illegal logging. The initiative promotes apiculture, snail-raising and planting of multi-purpose tree species as sources of income for unemployed rural men and women. To date, over 1,000 participants have been trained in all three activities and provided with a starter kit containing the necessary equipment. From this initial starter kit, farmers generate an average of USD 3,500 per year.

Participants also have access to leadership training, guidance on small-business development, and a revolving microcredit fund which provides start-up capital. Improved incomes have been invested in education, health and community infrastructure needs. WAIOL's business arm, Liberia Pure Honey and Moringa Promoters Inc., promotes and purchases participants' products, negotiates fair prices, and assists with packaging, sales and distribution to business centres across Liberia.

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KEY FACTS

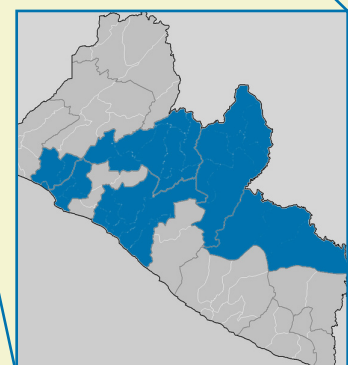
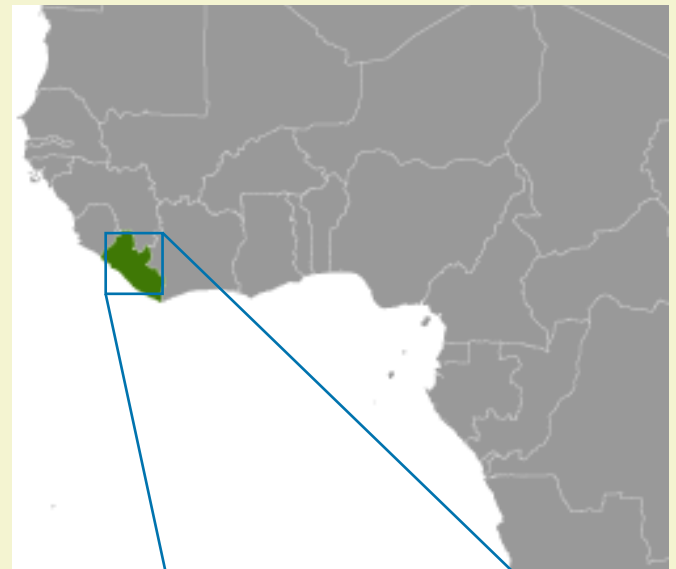
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2012

FOUNDED: 2004

LOCATION: Throughout Liberia

BENEFICIARIES: Over 600 rural men and women

BIODIVERSITY: Reducing dependence on forest resources



Background and Context



West Africa Initiative of Liberia (WAIOL) works to expand livelihoods options in rural Liberia by providing communities with the necessary training and equipment to undertake snail-raising, bee-keeping and tree planting using a number of native species. WAIOL also provides access to leadership training, guidance on small-business development, and a revolving microcredit fund. Meanwhile, the organization's marketing arm purchases and promotes farmer products.

Emerging from civil war

The initiative came about as a response to decades of near constant civil war that devastated almost every economic sector in the country, destroying lives and livelihoods in the process. The economic hardship caused by the civil war has forced many girls and women into prostitution, while young men and boys frequently work under extreme conditions in the mining industry to make a living. Unemployment in most rural Liberian communities was and remains very high, and as a consequence, most rural people are highly dependent on forest resources for both food and fuel – hunting bush animals for meat, fishing in rivers, and harvesting forest resources such as snails, honey and fuel wood. The result has been acute environmental degradation as resources have been overharvested and large areas left deforested or degraded. In the apiculture sector, wild bee harvesting using smoke has been detrimental to both bee populations and the forest, due to the high risk of forest fires.

Evolution of community-based organization

Formally established as WAIOL in 2009, the initiative evolved as a volunteer-led effort in the aftermath of the civil war in 2004, when its founding members became involved in emergency and relief programmes in the agricultural sector as a means of contributing to post-war economic and social recovery. With training in agriculture, the initial group of volunteers convened a Farmers' Field School project in five communities around Nimba County, central Liberia.

By the end of the pilot, 75 women and 50 men had been trained in integrated crop and pest management, snail-raising, bee-keeping, and *moringa* cultivation. Later, the trainees were organised into community-based farming groups, with each group member receiving five beehives, one snail cage, ten *moringa* seedlings, and a set of carpentry tools.

The success of the Farmers' Field School pilot project resulted in support from a USAID-funded initiative – the Rural Communities Empowerment Project – implemented by the United Methodist Church Agricultural Program (UMCAP). Identification of the project as a best practice in environmental conservation and poverty reduction, and the subsequent support provided by these backers, enabled the geographical scaling-up of the program. WAIOL founders were charged with providing management, technical services, and trainings in 30 rural communities across six counties between 2008 and 2009. During this time, 750 beehives, 350 snail cages and 10,000 *moringa* seedlings were distributed to 250 women and 100 men in the counties of Nimba, Bomi, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Bong and Montserrado, spanning the country's western coast and eastern inland forest regions.



The West Africa Initiative

Growing in technical capacity, WAIOL has operated since 2009 as the Liberian branch of West Africa Initiative (WAI), a programme implemented in both Liberia and Sierra Leone by Agricultural Missions Incorporated (AMI) and its partners. WAI, begun in 2007, is an initiative of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) that is designed to develop the capacity of the Councils of churches in Sierra Leone and Liberia to become engaged in community-based rural development. This effort is supported by three offices of PCUSA – Self Development of Peoples (SDOP), Disaster Assistance (PDA) and the Hunger Program (PHP) – with Agricultural Missions playing the lead role in project planning and implementation in both countries. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) and the United Church of Christ (UCC) also play roles in this effort.

After the partnership between the project's international supporters and the Liberia Council of Churches was terminated due to a lack of transparency and technical and management capacity, WAIOL was incorporated with a local board of directors and staff in 2009 to provide the institutional framework for the independent management of the WAI program. It currently oversees activities in three counties and has recently partnered with UNDP to replicate

its approaches with communities in and around a refugee camp. Although WAI is supported by donations from various ecumenical development agencies and faith-based organizations, WAIOL itself is not a faith-based organization and there are no conditions regarding religious belief or practice placed on the support of WAI in either Liberia or Sierra Leone.

Governance structure

The West Africa Initiative of Liberia is led by a five-member Board of Directors tasked with coordinating the training of individual communities in the six counties it currently operates in. The governance structure at the ground level, however, is highly decentralized: where a farmers' group or cooperative already exists in a community, WAIOL works with this body to implement its programme of activities. If competent local institutions are not already in place, WAIOL guides the community in establishing such a group to manage the day-to-day issues that arise from collective resource management and development programming. Group leadership workshops and technical support are provided by WAIOL's trained staff, but in each project location the initiative is very much owned and run by community members themselves.



“Community initiatives for sustainability should be supported, to reduce the pressure being mounted on forests and the environment”

Mr. Ezekiel T. Freeman, Country Coordinator, WAIOL

Key Activities and Innovations



The primary activities carried out by WAIOL include training in integrated crop and pest management, snail-raising, bee-keeping, *moringa* cultivation, and alternative livelihood strategies. This package of sustainable development alternatives is introduced in each community based on specific needs and adopted by project beneficiaries through a process of group learning before being fully overseen by a community-based organisation upon completion of WAIOL support.

i. Initial community interventions

For each new community, WAIOL facilitates needs assessments to identify priority areas for development and to plan project activities. Participatory rural appraisals (PRA) are used to encourage inclusive decision-making by community members. At the end of the PRA process, a community development committee (CDC) is established with responsibility for: selecting direct project beneficiaries in collaboration with WAIOL and local authorities; working with WAIOL



technicians to supervise project implementation; and assuming full management of project activities beyond the end of the funding period. The selection of project beneficiaries is informed by semi-structured interviews conducted with individual community members to assess their respective needs. These focus on women and youth in disadvantaged circumstances, including those particularly affected by the civil war and those with heavy burdens of responsibility for providing for their families.

ii. Farmers' Field Schools

At the centre of WAIOL's work is its use of Farmer Field Schools (FFS) to promote integrated crop and pest management and alternative livelihoods. This group-based, experiential learning process has a proven track record across much of the rural developing world as a means of transforming agricultural practices, and draws on the concepts of agroecology, experiential education and community development. First pioneered in Indonesia by the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (UN FAO) in the late 1980s, the central feature of the FFS approach is the use of simple experiments, field observations, and group analysis to enable participants to make their own locally specific decisions about crop management practices. This approach contrasts with most agricultural extension programmes, in which farmers are expected to adopt generalized recommendations developed by specialists from outside the community.

Over the course of the learning process, participating farmers meet at regular intervals at a designated field training site. The training element is 20% theory and 80% practical, with members also receiving a starter kit to help in the introduction of alternative livelihood activities. Having received training, participants return to their respective farms and implement the improved agricultural practices or diversified livelihood activities. The FFS training facilitator conducts follow-up visits to ensure that the new methods are being carried out and are proving effective.

iii. Exit strategy

At the completion of funding cycles, full responsibility for project activities is handed to community development committees, with leadership training provided in the form of workshops. As part of this progressive exit strategy, WAIOL provides an economic incentive for continuing alternative livelihood activities by directly purchasing farmers' honey and *moringa* produce. This has been important in communities where participants were initially sceptical about the viability of bee-keeping as a profitable enterprise, as Liberians in rural areas don't commonly consume honey. During the pilot project, project beneficiaries had difficulty selling their produce. To counter this issue, WAIOL established a business arm – Liberia Pure Honey and Moringa Promoters Incorporated (LPHMI) – to purchase



the honey from participants and market it centrally. The enterprise works to negotiate fair prices, design packaging and market honey and *moringa* products at grocery stores and markets throughout West Africa.

Expanding livelihood options

Currently, WAIOL works with the Presbyterian Church of America (PCUSA) in a partnership focused on rural community capacity building. Major activities being introduced include a focus on food security through swamp development for rice and vegetable cultivation, the introduction of cassava grinders and a rice mill, and the creation of a revolving microloan scheme to provide startup capital for small businesses. These activities are being carried out in three counties, with a total of 100 women and 50 men benefiting. WAIOL provides training in a range of income generating activities and provides individuals with the tools and equipment they need to carry out activities on their own. Vegetable demonstration plots have been established to promote organic crop and pest management using locally available materials to control and improve soil quality. To date, more than 600 farmers have benefitted from WAIOL training and support in this area.

Beekeeping, snail-raising and *moringa* production have proven to be highly successful livelihood activities. Each field of work has the potential to generate strong revenues. One beehive, for example, produces on average three gallons of honey per year, with each gallon of pure honey sold for USD 20. Community members are trained in beehive construction and colonization, beehive management, honey harvesting and honey processing. The honey is then purchased by LPHMI and marketed throughout West Africa. Community members are also trained in snail cage construction, stocking and management. Snails are scarce in the wild during the dry season and are not readily available to purchase. WAIOL trains its members to collect snails from the wild during the wet season, feed them and then introduce them onto the market during the dry season when profit margins are highest. Each snail cage can be stocked with 100 snails, which can be sold for USD .50 during the dry season, allowing members to generate USD 50 per cage. In the case of *moringa* cultivation, trees mature after just six months and a healthy tree generates on average USD 200 per year in leaves and high-protein seeds, which have a range of nutritional and medicinal uses. Leaves from the tree are harvested, washed, dried and pounded into powder. The powder is used as a dietary supplement for children and is a rich source of magnesium, potassium, calcium, iron, and vitamins A, B and C.

“Community initiatives should adopt appropriate technologies, organic approaches and environmentally friendly methods.”

Mr. Ezekiel T. Freeman, Country Coordinator, WAIOL

Impacts



BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Liberia harbours significant biodiversity, including over 2,000 flowering plant (225 of which are timber), 600 bird, 150 mammals and 75 reptiles species. Liberia also contains 42 per cent of West Africa's Upper Guinea Forest – the largest portion of any single country in the region. However, threats to Liberia's biodiversity and forests abound, and they have been exacerbated by the effects of decades of civil war. Population pressure, shifting cultivation, poaching and hunting all threaten wildlife and forests. The civil war has resulted in many displaced people and refugees who depend on forest resources for food, fuel and shelter. Decades of disorder have led to unregulated timber extraction and the steady deterioration of almost all of Liberia's economic sectors. This combination of factors has left the rural population with little choice but to turn to the forests for survival – killing bush animals for meat and the largely unregulated collection of snails, honey and firewood to meet basic needs. The result has been considerable environmental degradation. WAIOL aims to address the loss of biodiversity and decline of ecosystem health by providing rural communities with sustainable and ecologically sound sources of income that reduce their dependence on blind, unmitigated resource extraction.

Relieving pressures on forest resources

The improved bee-keeping practices promoted by WAIOL have helped to rejuvenate and protect the wild bee population. The activity engenders plant cross-pollination, thereby improving natural vegetation in the surrounding area. Domestic bee-keeping also reduces incidence of wild bee and honey harvesting which has been historically detrimental to bees and a leading cause of forest fires. Similarly, bush fires, excessive use of agro-chemicals, and overharvesting for consumption have combined to cause a decline of Liberia's snail population. By promoting domestic snail-raising, WAIOL activities protect wild snail populations and help to avoid accidental bush fires that frequently occur when snails are collected

from the wild at night. WAIOL also promotes the cultivation of *moringa*, *Gliricidia*, and *Acacia*—all secondary timber species. All of these species are also leguminous, meaning they fix atmospheric nitrogen into the soil, improving its fertility. Their root systems also improve the physical quality of the soil, they provide needed shade cover, and all can be sustainably harvested for fuel wood and building materials. Tree-planting activities have helped to combat deforestation while simultaneously providing income and services to local people.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

Decades of civil war devastated Liberia's economy. A lack of income-generating options during and in the aftermath of the war drove many women and girls into prostitution and forced young men to work in low-paying, high-risk and health-negative sectors like mining. In rural areas, many communities were displaced from their land by the conflict and turned out of necessity to unsustainable harvesting of forests for food, fuel and shelter.

Rebuilding rural livelihoods

The training and equipment provided by WAIOL empowers rural Liberians to rebuild their lives by engaging in environmentally sustainable and economically viable income-generating activities. WAIOL not only provides training but all the equipment and tools needed to establish businesses in these activities. At the conclusion of each training session, trainees are sent home with beehives, snail cages and *moringa* seedlings.

The impact on local incomes has been transformational. A beekeeper who owns 20 beehives could harvest 60 gallons of honey per year, generating USD 1,200. An additional USD 50 per annum can be generated from one snail cage, (stocked with 100 snails sold for USD .50 each during the dry season), while a well-established *moringa* tree generates on average of USD 200 per year. These figures

suggest that a farmer owning ten beehives, one snail-cage and ten *moringa* trees – capital accumulation that is well within the realm of possibility in WAIOL communities – has the potential to generate USD 1,200 from honey sales, USD 50 from snail-raising and USD 2,000 from *moringa* sales, a total of USD 3,250 per year.

In a country which, in 2009, had a per capita GDP of USD 216.40, this is a substantial improvement. In fact, the income of some of WAIOL's beneficiaries exceeds this amount. WAIOL's most successful beekeeper started out with five beehives and currently owns 150. In 2010, he generated USD 9,500 from honey sales, and in 2011 he generated USD 12,300. Like other WAIOL participants, he uses the income he generates to pay for his children's school fees, medical bills and daily meals. Many other participants have used the proceeds from their sales to start small businesses.

In addition to dramatic improvements in local income, *moringa*, snails and honey are themselves nutritious and constitute an important supplementary food source. Snails and *moringa* seeds and leaves are valuable sources of protein for families who would not be able to afford to buy fish or meat from the market. In this way, WAIOL's activities directly address malnutrition, associated health problems, and food insecurity.

Empowerment of women

Women in particular have benefitted from WAIOL's activities, outnumbering men in their participation in the initiative. The livelihood activities promoted by the organization offer a welcome alternative for rural women who might otherwise have few economic options. Women participate in all of the activities offered by WAIOL, including training in bee-keeping, snail-raising and *moringa* production. The most successful of WAIOL's female beekeepers is a single mother of three children who receives no support from her children's fathers. Prior to her participation in WAIOL, she worked in prostitution to provide for her family. Following the training provided by WAIOL, she now owns 55 beehives, two snail cages and 20 *moringa* trees. The income from these activities is allowing her to build a house of her own and send her three children to school. Many of the 350 rural Liberian women who have been empowered by their participation in the WAIOL initiative share similar stories.



Sustainability and Replication



SUSTAINABILITY

WAIOL is legally registered with the Government of Liberia and enjoys formal recognition through an article of incorporation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accreditation from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs, and certification by the Ministry of Agriculture. Financially, WAIOL remains dependent on donor contributions and, since 2004, has built a network of partnerships that have supported the initiative's operational costs. In addition to donor support, WAIOL's business arm – Liberia Pure Honey and Moringa Promoters Incorporated (LPHMI) – purchases, promotes and markets WAIOL community honey and *moringa* products. As well as receiving profits from its sales on behalf of participants, the management of its own stock of 200 *moringa* trees and 100 beehives has supplemented the initiative's revenue stream, with the long-term aim of making WAIOL financially self-sustaining.

In terms of organizational and social sustainability, WAIOL promotes a high degree of community ownership over its activities, and the initiative is structured so as to progressively reduce community dependence on WAIOL for day-to-day support. The creation of community development committees is central to this, allowing communities to assume the management of project activities while ensuring that participants continue to receive support locally even after the project technicians are withdrawn. This also allows WAIOL to free up its resources to replicate the project in other areas.

WAIOL is playing an important role in the reestablishment of Liberia Beekeepers Association, which is working to collect best practices in beekeeping and establish an information exchange programme. The Association is developing creative ways for local farmers to buy into membership and contribute their voices to the rebuilding of the country's honey sector. "Liberian Pure Honey" has been a resounding success at Liberia's annual agricultural trade fairs. Even the president is a fan; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf first tasted the honey during one of the fairs and has continued to regularly purchase the product.

REPLICATION

The rate of replication of WAIOL trainings since 2004 is impressive. The initial Farmer Field School pilot project in Nimba County has since been applied in a further five counties across the country (Bomi, Grand Bassa, Grand Gedeh, Bong and Montserrado) and its activities have transformed the lives of over 600 beneficiaries.

As well as the reestablishment of the Liberia Beekeepers Association, a potentially critical vehicle for replication at the national level, WAIOL is currently working with Universal Outreach (a Canadian NGO) to replicate its existing programmes to other parts of the country. In partnership with Universal Outreach and the LBA, WAIOL aims to establish a national Honey Council that will help to liaise between local communities and the government on issues relevant to the bee-keeping sector. The Honey Council will assist in the development of international trade partnerships and legitimise Liberian honey on the international market.

To promote its products, the initiative participated in the 2008 and 2009 National Food and Agriculture Trade Fairs, displaying its Liberia Pure Honey, snails, and *moringa* products. WAIOL also participated in 2009 and 2010 annual trade fairs organised by USAID, and was awarded a certificate recognising "Best Application of Business Skills and Market Linkages".

WAIOL recently signed a contract with UNDP Liberia to replicate some aspects of the WAI program in designated communities in and around Bahn Refugee Camp in Nimba County as part of an intervention that aims to build upon ongoing emergency relief operations. The project in the refugee camp in Bahn and specified neighbouring communities is composed of three thematic areas – environmental management, sustainable livelihoods, and prevention of sexual gender-based violence – and aims to capitalize on WAIOL's expertise in building the capacities of local institutions and communities for conflict prevention and management.

PARTNERS

- United Methodist Church Agricultural Program (UMCAP): Prior to its incorporation as WAIOL, the initiative operated as part of the two-year, USAID-funded 'Rural Communities Empowerment Project'. The project was implemented by UMCAP, with USAID providing grants to pay for project staff, and logistical and transportation costs. WAIOL contributed management expertise, technical services, and trainings.
- Agricultural Missions Inc. (AMI): Since 2009, WAIOL has acted as the national facilitating body in Liberia for the West Africa Initiative, which brings together three offices of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) – Self Development of Peoples (SDOP), Disaster Assistance (PDA) and the Hunger Program (PHP) – as well as the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) and the United Church of Christ (UCC).
- Universal Outreach (Canada): Working with WAIOL and the Liberia Beekeepers Association to document best practices in apiculture, facilitate their replication throughout the country, and to form a national Honey Council.
- Friends of Liberia (USA): WAIOL, in partnership with UMCAP, was awarded a grant of USD 1,988 from Friends of Liberia to introduce bee-keeping, snail-raising and *moringa* production for Liberian women in Glakapallah, Bong County.
- UNDP: Working with WAIOL to introduce alternative livelihood activities in communities in and around Bahn Refugee Camp, Nimba County



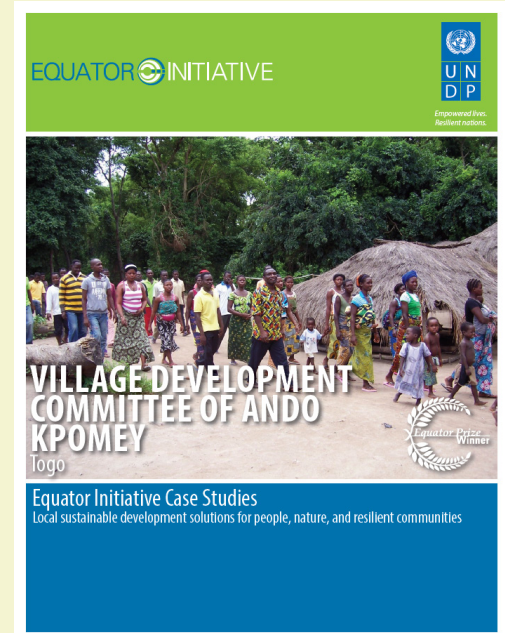
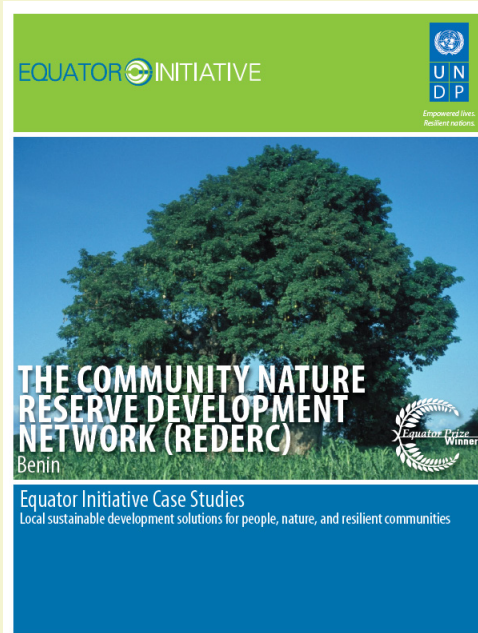
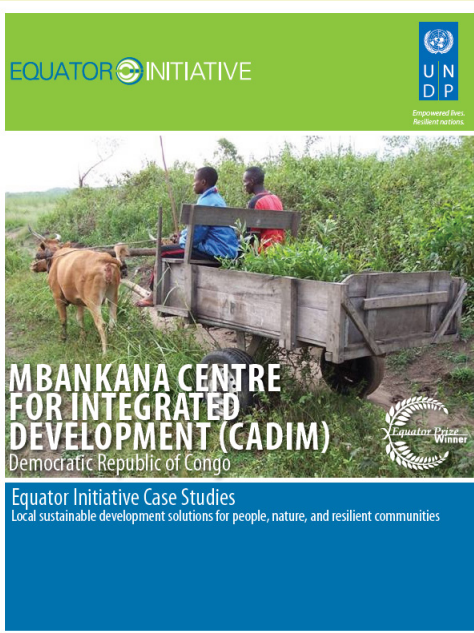
“The future depends on conserving biodiversity...so everybody’s involvement is required.”

Mr. Ezekiel T. Freeman, Country Coordinator, WAIOL

FURTHER REFERENCE

- West Africa Initiative of Liberia Equator Initiative profile page
- Gilbert, K.L. 2012. [Bees, snails, Moringa trees boost Liberians.](#)
- Agricultural Missions Inc. 2010. [The West Africa Initiative: A model for achieving sustainable community based food security.](#)

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