

Witnessing Liberia's Rising! "Part II"

A Review Of The Swedish Contribution

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SIDA Simi Annual Review Team & Officials of LSRP Review Activities After field visit in Nimba County

When renowned Liberian gospel musician, Marion J. Cassel, produced a gospel song in which she prophesized that 'Liberia will rise, shine and prosper in Africa-yea the world, many people, perhaps frustrated about the prolonged civil crisis at the time, did not take into consideration the genuine meaning of her song.

Many Liberians, especially Christians, superficially lippped that music—"Liberia! Sweet Land Of Liberty; You Will, Rise, You Will Shine, You Will Prosper In Africa—Yea The World"—including former

President Charles Taylor who offered her US\$25,000 for the prophetic nature of the song. This writer has observed that about 15 years later, Mrs. Cassel's prophetic music is gradually coming to pass. Immediately after the cessation of the on-and-off 14-year hostilities, the wind of peace, progress and prosperity began to blow across Liberia, with many friendly governments as well as bilateral and multilateral organizations (old and new) renewing their once lost relationships with Liberia.

My memory immediately flashed back to the song, which blew across the country when I was much younger. Today, nearly 10 years, after the war ended, Liberia is on the right trajectory of raising, with many international partners including the Swedish International development Agency (SIDA)—the development arm of the Swedish Government—playing a mammoth role.

Though SIDA is currently collaborating with the Ministry of Public Works by spending millions of dollars on feeder roads in rural Liberia, this organization began contributing to Liberia's rising more than half dozens of years ago.

How? One day, sitting across 9th Street in 2007, by way of LBDI Bank, I saw a vehicle marked SIDA, heading towards the offices of the former Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Always curious, I wanted to know the mission of the occupants. I strolled towards the TRC office—towards the Atlantic Ocean, enjoying the naturally breezy environment—following the vehicle. As I drew closer to the offices of the TRC, jubilation was already taking place in the compound, where the vehicle had entered. I asked, “What’s the jubilation about?” my ears stood straight like a rabbit to get every part of the response. “SIDA has pledged about US\$1.5 million to the TRC’s hearing process,” he broke the news to me. I, too, was excited and wrote the information in my Daily Gossip Diary Book. That was the first time I ever saw SIDA and learnt about it.

Wondering as to why such a huge donation by the Swedish Government through SIDA to TRC, I have since decided to follow their activities. And again, few years later, while taking a bottle of chilly soft drink after the 1st half of a football match at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium, I spotted a blue land cruiser jeep, this time marked LSFRP (Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project), entering the compound of the Ministry of Public Works. I immediately gulped down the remaining soft drink and crossed the road into the Public Works’ compound.

There, I customarily asked a lady: “What’s the mission of SIDA in the ministry?” The lady, in joyful mood like others, responded: “My brother, these people you see in that office writing on it SIDA, are here to help the Liberian Government, through the Ministry of Public Works, to construct and rehabilitate several feeder roads in the country”.

I stood confused, thinking over the word “feeder road”, because it was strange to me. Apparently noticing my flummox posture, the lady tapped my shoulder and said: “look, don’t be confused. Here, at the Ministry of Public Works, we speak engineering terminology.” “I am not an engineer. So what do you mean by the word feeder road,” I demanded. “Feeder roads simply means farm to market roads,” she replied and I quickly thought of roads in rural areas, and added the word to my technical vocabulary.

That was seven years back, but my curiosity about SIDA’s work had not stopped until I visited Lofa and Bong where SIDA is engaged in several rural road construction/rehabilitation works. But before moving up country, I asked authority of the Ministry of Public Works to furnish me with information regarding the Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project (LSFRP). The ministry, without delay quickly handed me a package of SIDA’s activities.

In that package, SIDA had a total of 100 million Swedish Kronor (USD equivalent of about 14 million) to construct farm-to-market roads in Bong and Lofa Counties, with an extension plan of another 100 million Swedish Kronor in Nimba County and other parts of Liberia.

On February 23, 2012, after several unofficial monitoring and evaluation expeditions of SIDA's projects, I surfaced at Boyai Junction in Bong County, Sanoyea District. Taking a rest under a cool mud hut, wondering why SIDA has chosen to spend such a huge sum of money on little Liberia (I internally chanted the Maron Cassell's Liberia rising song), I saw this same blue land cruiser jeep along with three other vehicles moving towards Boyai Town Junction. I hurriedly set my camera, took my Daily Gossip Diary Book and waited to see those onboard these vehicles.

Disembarking from those vehicles were officials of SIDA and MPW. Not wanting to ask anybody, perhaps avoiding embarrassment, I sneaked on the other side of one of the vehicles. There, I obtained a document titled: ***"Schedule of SIDA Semi-Annual Review Mission February 2012"***. Here, I didn't need a rocket scientist to tell me what these people's mission was. Obviously, they were on a monitoring exercise.

The opportunity to know more about SIDA was now at hand. I quickly arranged for transportation and decided to follow the SIDA Semi-Annual Review Mission's delegation. For me, it was not about how long they were expected to travel or the constraints that I would face while traveling with a delegation that did not know me, but the interest of the beneficiaries was what that mattered most to me.

While preparing to take off from Boyai Town Junction with the delegation, I noticed joy and smiles on the faces of motorcyclists, taxi drivers and other commercial cars, as well as, pedestrians who have just arrived at the Boyai Town Junction from Kelebah Town. I witnessed these people paying their fares with elation, while others were dancing to the tone of music playing in their cars or on their motorbikes.

I asked one of the passengers named Prince Lackie. "Why are you smiling like this?" He responded: "My son," he looked me in the face, "this feeder road construction work by the Government of Liberia, through SIDA, has really minimized transportation cost for us."

Before the intervention, he made me to understand, they used to pay L\$1,000 (approx. US\$15) from Kelebah to Totota on motorbikes. Now, passengers riding on motorbikes are paying L\$300 from Kelebah to Totota. "I think this is what citizens of any country would expect from their government after a devastating civil war like ours," Mr. Lackie said.

In no time, we took off on the Totota-Piata road in the same Bong County, where the MPW/SIDA road construction is extending. In route to Piata, I noticed smaller vehicles including taxi and private cars speeding as if they were on paved roads. Interestingly, some even overtook our vehicles as if they were on a competition for a prize. I got consumed by curiosity as to where they were rushing. Just as I lifted my head, we had arrived at a crowded market ground. Farm produce including fruits and roots were in abundance, and the people were

chasing in on them, with buyers coming from as far as the county's capital. That's what good roads do.

I thought I was the only one who noticed this, but Mr. Ulf Brudfors, SIDA's Monitoring Consultant, also took note of the jammed parked market site and decided to make a stop and interact with the people.

Everybody we spoke to, including vehicle drivers and other motorists in the market, praised the Ministry of Public Works and SIDA for constructing/rehabilitating their roads.

"Local produce and goods of any kind are available in this our market", a market woman remarked. Another added: "We don't have to walk again to go to market; our roads are now being worked on; log bridges are now being changed into concrete bridges to allow heavy weight vehicles to ply our roads and bring us goods and at the same time carry local produce to urban markets"

"Nothing would please us in this town, but to continue to pray for the Public Works Minister and his team who made it possible for SIDA to work on our roads," one Emanuel Tokpah, a palm oil dealer asserted.

With this, it appears that the most talk about "Normal Day" in Liberia is gradually returning. During the "Normal Days" (days before the war started in 1989) when everything was okay for rural dwellers, they sent their children to Monrovia for higher education and paid their tuition from proceeds they generated from their farm produce.

During the assessment tour, I particularly took note of the influx of smaller vehicles in several villages along the road as compared to three decades ago. This means that the only hard work residents of those villages have to do in order get their goods transported by vehicles is to bring it from their various houses to where the vehicle is parked in the town. Even at that, those who are closer to the car road will not have to walk long distances because the front view of their residence is spacious enough to accommodate two or three vehicles. "Good road condition is responsible for these kinds of things, a member of the SIDA delegation said.

What I saw in Zorzor and Voinjama Districts

When we arrived in Voinjama City (the capital of Lofa) on Friday, February 24, 2012 at about 7:15 pm, a cloud of dust smoked into the air, perhaps as a result of the speeding vehicles plying the dusty streets. I immediately booked a lodging room in the county guest house attached to the Voinjama Administrative Building.

In my room, I switched on my camera to view my photos and to properly arrange my notes. While in my room, I decided to photograph the dusty city through one of the windows.

There, I saw two older men walking towards the administrative building where the MPW/SIDA has their offices, saying, “Thank God, this dust business in the town will soon be over.”

This conversation caught my attention for it was unquestionably newsworthy. I quickly took my recorder and rushed down stair. Luckily, I saw the two older men standing right before the building in which I was lodging. I requested an interview with them. One of them said, “What do you want to interview us on?” “The Voinjama City Streets,” I responded.

The two of them said in a very low, but overjoyed tune: “My son, just wait till tomorrow,” one said. “There will be a meeting between county authority and the MPW/SIDA officials at the administrative building. We will tell you everything on our minds,” the other added.

I wanted to verify this information from the SIDA delegation, but my tour with them was unofficial and I did not have my authorized ID Card with me. Early Saturday morning at about 8:30, I sneaked into the Conference Room of the Lofa County Superintendent, where the meeting was already taking place. As I entered, I heard a sound of clapping, followed by jubilation with many voices saying “Thank you Lord, you are wonderful.”

What makes the “Lord wonderful” was what I was most interested in. And so I asked a female attendant of the meeting. “SIDA, through the good leadership of the Public Works team has promised to put coal tile on the main street in Voinjama. No more dust, no more health hazards, and no more too much accident will be in our town”, the woman concluded. I also asked a male participant about this good news.

His emotion about information regarding the pavement of Voinjama City streets could not be over emphasized. His voice thundered: “We have lost our ‘Bread Basket’ title of Liberia just because of bad road conditions.” According to him EU, UNDP, USAID and some other “big organizations come here, but have not thought of paving our road. Only this little known SIDA that has decided to do this wonderful thing for us, only God can reward the people of Sweden whose taxes are being used to construct our farm-to-market roads.” Sounding very euphoric, the man went on: “From today, I am a citizen of Sweden and all Swedish are citizens of Liberia.”

Truly indeed, the streets of Voinjama have being paved; risks of health hazards and accidents from dust have reduced. But besides, the pavement work has undoubtedly bolstered commercial activities in that part of Liberia.

Another beneficiary of SIDA assistance in Lofa County is the people from ***Quadugboni District***. For the first time, this district has be connected with good roads, with all the log bridges transformed in to concrete bridges as a result of SIDA’s ongoing intervention.

The transformation of log bridges into concrete bridges is an accepted standard set by Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project. No contractor dares to break this rule. In fact, this is one of the

reasons why Mr. Ulf Brudefors, SIDA Monitoring Consultant usually lead the Annual Review Team to Liberia.

To date, the Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project has constructed a total of 583 kilometers of farm to market roads in Lofa, Bong and Nimba Counties with possible extension in the Southeastern part of Liberia.

Some of the completed farms to market roads are: Totota-Piata road, Gboyear-Kankanolata, Gwainyear-Cow Farm areas, Makpoh Hill, Gbansue-Suloma roads, Phebe-Gbonota stretch and Salayea-Zolowo/Markesu roads in Bong County.

Others are Voinjama-Kerbemai road, Dorbor-Bazagizia road, 60.5 KM Voinjama-Jallamai road; 28.7KM Makesu-Fassawalazu/Salayea-Tinsue road, the 18 km Borkeza-Kpassagizia road, Voinjama-Barkedu road, Voinjama-Bolongolidu road and Lawalazu-Vezela road all in Lofa Counties.

In 2012, the LSFRP extended its activities in Nimb County targeting the following roads, Yarsonnah-Payee Road, Nengbein-Yelekoryee connecting Tindink Menyan, Suakarzue-Yargoupa connecting Flown Road, Zorgowee-Dulay Road, Zuluyee-Yehbo Road and Sanniquillie towards Varnyapa Road.

Whether the people of Bong and Lofa Counties have the capacity to maintain these roads after SIDA pulls out or not is the question that sparked out all through the assessment tour. “Just fix our road; we will ensure that we mobilize men and women of our villages to routinely carry out road maintenance exercises, Chiefs in some towns declared. They said in town hall meeting that “all we need is wheelbarrows, cutlasses, shovels and rain booths.”

Capacity Building

Realizing the capacity gap in the Ministry, the Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project in collaboration with the Bangladeshi Signal Contingent 8 Sector B of the United Nations Mission in Liberia trained 15 rural development staff of the Ministry of Public Works in basic computer training program. The training program which was conducted in 2012 in Gbarnga, Bong County lasted for one week.

In continuation of the capacity building program, the LSFRP in August 2013 organized a 5 days capacity building workshop for 15 County Resident Engineers in rural road routine maintenance in Voinjama, Lofa County.

Two topics, feeder road maintenance and management skills were presented by two Ugandans Feeder Road Experts, Fredrick Wobusinge and Baryahikayo Jorochem. The two Feeder Road Experts, according to SIDA Team Leader, Mr. Belal Hussain were hired by HIFAB International Consultant to come and share their country’s experience in feeder road construction and

maintenance with their Liberian counterparts. “They are here to share their experiences with the Liberian government in rural road routine maintenance in their country which we hope will eventually be replicated in Liberia’s rural road maintenance program” the HIFAB trained engineer said.

At the opening of the five days’ workshop, Public Works Feeder Road Chief, Alibaba Kpakolo said road construction with proper routine maintenance plan is key to sustainable economic development. “It will be a waste of resources if we build all these roads without putting in place appropriate maintenance strategy”, the Chief of Feeder Road said.

Mr. Kpakolo said the training is also intended to guarantee millions of donors’ money that is being invested in the road sector in terms of quality maintenance and durability.

Additionally, the LSFRP provided training in Feeder Road Maintenance for 7 Seven persons in Nimba County. The training program which was conducted on April 21, 2015, is an extension of the Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project’s capacity building initiative for local Liberian engineers to effectively take over the projects when the road program is over.

Speaking at the one day training session in Pipe Casting & Culvert Installation (PCCI) at the home of the Public Works’ Resident Engineer in Nimba County where the training was conducted, an official of the LSFRP, Mr. Mrityunjoy Ghosh said the training is aimed at bridging the capacity gap of local Liberians so that they (laborers) can enhance the performance of local contractors.

Mr. Ghosh said in addition to enhancing the performance of road contractors, the training program will also promote unskilled laborers to semi-skill and from semi-skilled laborers to skilled workers to take over the maintenance of their farm-to market roads in their various communities.

He noted that promoting unskilled laborers to semi-skill and from semi-skilled laborers to skilled workers will rapidly enhance the country’s infrastructure recovery program, and thus reduces the hiring of foreign experts from Guinea and Ivory Coast, which according to him is cost intensive.

LSFRP Among Best Managed Projects In Liberia

The Liberia Swedish Feeder Project (LSFRP) has not only being rated for its technical capacity, but also its administrative/managerial capacity. During the 2016 visit of SIDA Annual Review Team, Deputy Public Works Minister for Rural Development, Jackson J. Paye, the man with oversight responsibility for rural roads, told the Review Team that, the Liberia Swedish Feeder Road Project is amongst best managed project in Liberia.

Each year, the SIDA Annual Review Mission visits its funded projects in Liberia including the LSFPR to ascertain first hand progress as to the status of these projects.

Minister Paye told the team that the project team was very concern about the prudent management of the project, adding, nothing will be done to jeopardize the project.

“We are very concern about the effective management of the project. As a matter of fact, the LSFPR is one of the best manage projects in Liberia”, the MPW Deputy Minister emphasized.

He bragged that the Swedish funded project under the LSFPR cause less per kilometer as compare to other projects in Liberia.

He recalled how the project has even made some savings over the years from the budget, which he said is being used to fund some of the works they are currently doing.

Speaking of the project’s impact on the lives of ordinary Liberians, the Deputy Minister said, apart from road accessibility, the project has created over 583 jobs in affected counties in the area of routine maintenance.

He described the LSFPR as one of the most successful projects in Liberia and craved for an expansion in other parts of Liberia.

Accolade Received

On February 17, 2016, residents of Yorpea town in Nimba County could not hold back their emotions when they showered praises on the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) for what they referred to as bringing them from darkness to light.

“SIDA has taken us from darkness to light. Our travelling difficulties are now over” said the town chief.

Speaking at a brief ceremony during inspection of road project, the town chief of Yorpea town Melvin Paye said the people of Old Yorpea town have been disconnected from the rest of the county for over a decade.

According to him, the road project has finally ended their 10 years of travelling nightmare. Town Chief Paye noted that such intervention deserves more than appreciation.

Responding to the honor, the Counselor/Program Officer at the Swedish Embassy near Monrovia, Madam Eva Ohlsson said, the mission was very grateful for the gift. She described the people of Yorpea town as good and productive people.

She said roads are needed for the farming products to reach the markets and for the women and children to reach the schools and health facilities. She underscored the need for more roads in the area.

Madam Ohlsson stated that, the people of Sweden represented by the Swedish Embassy in Monrovia are very happy to work together with the Ministry of Public Works in connecting the two chiefdoms (Old & New Yorpea Town).



Ceremony Marking Presentation of Traditional Gifts to SIDA in Yorpea Town

Unquestionably, like Maron Cassell intoned several years back, Liberia is today rising—rising towards a middle income country level by 2030, and the Swedish Government, through SIDA, is magnanimously contributing to that rising. Oh, yes, SIDA is raising the hopes of Liberians in Lofa, Bong and Nimba with roads and bridges: excellent roads and concrete bridges that will enable our people easily trade their farm produce for the first time in decades into large markets and improve their lives with cash they generate. Once cut off from these opportunities, these people are now riding on beautiful roads built in thick jungles; they, too, are rising as Liberia as a nation rises. If you are not, then, I am definitely a witness.