

AJWS NARRATIVE REPORTING FORM



This narrative report is an opportunity for you to update AJWS on your work. Please keep your responses brief. AJWS also learns about your work through regular communication and visits.

AJWS staffs are interested in hearing not only about progress but also about setbacks and challenges. The types of social change we seek to advance are difficult to achieve. Challenges and failures happen and we believe we can learn from them. Thank you for your honest and open responses.

Note: Please answer the questions below in one to two paragraphs per questions.

1. Grant Information

Organization Name	Rural Integrated Center for Community Empowerment -RICCE
Project Title	Increasing Women Participation in Natural Resource Management to Restore Traditional Knowledge
Reporting Period	Final Technical report
Grant Amount	25, 000.00
Grant Identification Number i.e	14451

2. Describe the one greatest success that your organization has the last year.

One of the greatest successes that is remarkable is that the project funded the development of RICCE Five - Year Strategy Plan. For the past ten years RICCE was unable to review its existing plan and to redefine its direction, programs as well as allocate resources in a way that meet the current reality due to funding constrains. The AJWS project supported us in conducting stakeholders' consultation processes which led to the development of the Strategic Plan. This plan acts as a blueprint for the organization and is expected to strengthen our intervention in communities in a more robust and strategic way in meeting the needs of our beneficiaries.

Another achievement that is laudable is the successful development and presentation of a policy brief calling for the halting or closure of Solway Mining Group exploration within the Blei, Sehyi and Gba Community Forest. It can be recalled that Solway was granted exploration license by the Liberian government in 2019 to explore Iron Ore in the three community forests which were designated for strict conservation with a Management Plan developed by FDA and conservation partners. The government veto the decision of the Joint Community Forest Management Bodies (JCFMB) and awarded the company with no FPIC process. Meanwhile, Solway exploration has resulted to pollution of water bodies that are used by the communities for drinking and other domestics activities with no intervention to remedy the problem. In a consultation meeting held in Gbobayee on November 18, 2022, the affected communities represented by women groups, youths, CFMB and other interest groups worked with RICCE and developed a policy brief that was submitted to the County Authority at a round table program held at the Superintendent Office. Copy of the policy brief is attached as an annex to the report for your reference.

There are increasing interest and support of women in conservation efforts as they began to realize benefits from NTFPs from the traditional skill program. The women during the consultation for the development of policy brief called for halting of Solway operation in their community forest, for them to be able to revert to conservation; they believe this will bring them long term benefits including the presence of their biodiversity, forest and other ecosystem services as compared to Solway mining. They admitted that conservation benefits may be seen as slow, but it does not pollute their environment.

The incorporation of Village Saving and Loan Association into the women program is motivating women and strengthening social cohesion. The initial intent for the VSLA was to create transparent means for saving and sharing of benefits from sale of materials produced by the trainees. To our amazement, VSLA initiative has

grown to a complete financial safe haven, making funds available for loan and social support to members.

3. Describe the main activities that you carried out during this grant period. We do not expect you to detail all of the activities you completed. If capacity building was an objective of your grant, please include anything related to capacity-building in your answers below.

Introduction

This report covers activities carried out under the RICCE/AJWS project Entitle: **“Increasing Women Participation in Natural Resource Management to Restore Traditional Knowledge”**. The project was implemented in Five communities in Zor Chiefdom, Gbehlay Geh district from April 1, 2022 - 31 January 2023.

The activities conducted under this project include.

1. Continue support to indigenous women knowledge transfer initiative established with women groups in Geipa, Kpolay, Gbobayee and extend to two new communities (Sehtontuo and Dulay)_through value addition to NTFPs and continue awareness on women land rights using the new land rights law
2. Contribute to the construction of RICCE resource center at RICCE Sanniquellie Office
3. Technical support to VSLA
4. Develop RICCE five years strategy plan.



Component 1. Continue support to indigenous women knowledge transfer initiative established with women groups in Geipa, Kpolay, Gbobaye and extend to two new communities (Dulay and Sehtontuo) through value addition to NTFPs and continue awareness on women land rights.

RICCE continued support to the women groups in the five project communities through the provision of materials to the women for skill training, conduct of awareness on women land rights, biodiversity conservation and support to trainers for the traditional knowledge transfer program.

RICCE conducted refresher trainings in each project community to strengthen women knowledge on basic human rights, advocacy strategy and biodiversity conservation. The trainings were held on September 15 to 20, 2022 and November 20, 2022, respectively. The overall objective of the trainings was to increase awareness of biodiversity conservation, women land rights and principles of Human right from a gender perspective. The trainings targeted community leaders, chiefs, elders, women, youth and men. The strategy of incorporating local leaders and other community dwellers into the trainings other than just the women groups created opportunity for other women who were not directly involved with the project to acquire new knowledge on human rights, women’s land rights and biodiversity conservation. The involvement of the local leaders from the onset created ownership and supported the women conservation and skills training program. As a result, the town chief in the project communities held meetings, called on community dwellers to patronize the women products and to give priority to the women to harvest NTFPs intended for the training program.

Topics covered during the trainings were basic Human Rights Principles with a focus on Universal declaration of Human Rights, Convention of the Elimination of all form of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), fundamental Rights section of the Liberia Constitution, 2018 Land Rights Act(LRA) , Community Right Law of 2009 and the Inheritance Law with focus on women land rights. The main point of discussion was the gender disparity in the application of the laws and the need to integrate gender responsiveness so that women and girls have equal

access, opportunities and treatment under the laws as their male counterparts. The trainings highlighted the gender gaps in the application of the laws and called on the local leaders to uphold the highest ethical standard in ensuring that women and men, boys and girls enjoy these inherent rights. The training also enlightened the women on their basic rights and encouraged them to claim those rights. Speaking on biodiversity conservation, Renee Gibson, the RICCE program Manager who facilitated the topic, laid emphasis significance of the biodiversity within the ENNR and the community forests (Blei, Gba and Sehyi), she cautioned the participants about the richness of the landscape and called on them to prioritize conservation over concession which has a potential to deplete the natural resources leaving the community dwellers in poverty and a vulnerable state.

A total of 192 persons with the sex aggregate of 145 females and 47 males participated in the five separate trainings. The training participants include town chiefs, Community Forest guards, youth leaders, members of the Forest, the Women Environmental forum and Rangers of the Forestry Development Authority (FDA).

The women traditional skill training program continues to expand and transfer skills to young women in the project communities. During this year, the skill transfer program expanded to two new communities totaling five communities including Dulay, Sehtontuo, Kporlay, Geipa and Gbobayee located in Gbehlay Geh District, Nimba Cuntly. The number of women supported in the training program were 150 in the five locations. RICCE provided training materials and monthly incentives to the trainers as well as mentorship to the women's groups. The momentum for the skill training continue to increase as demand for the traditional handmade products such as fishing nets, mats, rattan chair, bags, baskets and others increase in the local communities. There is high buy-in from the local leaders for the women training program. During a stakeholders' engagement meeting held in Zualay, Hon. Joseph Yormie, a chief elder and Paramount Chief lauded RICCE and her partner AJWS for their support to the communities. He noted that the project is not only increasing the demand for traditional products locally, but it is also creating income generation opportunities for women; this is also promoting social cohesion and contributing to the reduction of domestic violence among spouses as women now make significant financial contributions to their families. In addition, women are now seen actively participating in community meetings, making significant contributions to trending issues such as land governance, forest and politics. Hon. Yormie, acknowledged the momentous reduction in number of domestic violence cases reported to the local courts in the communities during the project period. He admitted that young women and girls were idle in the community but now they are adding value to themselves and making contributions to their communities, something he believe is a result of the RICCE/ AJWS project.

Working with communities to prioritize biodiversity conservation over concession is much more challenging than envisaged, especially when stakeholders involved have divided interest. It can be recalled that local leaders in the project communities were manipulated by County authorities in 2019 to sign an exploration license, they changed the community Forest Conservation scheme to multiple use and signed exploration award to Solway, an Iron Ore mining company. It was a challenging time to revert the mindsets that companies will bring quick employment opportunities, social benefits and other which the communities expected. During the project period RICCE conducted series of awareness meetings in the project communities particularly in Solway exploration communities. RICCE awareness messages on environmental justice including community land rights, Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC), women Land rights and the community rights laws provided insights and is building momentum for the halting of the Solway agreement especially as the community's high expectation for jobs, and social development turned to a mere dream. Most community members including community leaders confided in RICCE and told us that the decision to award contract to Solway was from higher up and was not vetted by the communities. They expressed disappointment over the poor performance of Solway Company including the water source pollution and their lack of remedy.



RICCE awareness activities in collaboration with the Joint Community Forest Management Bodies has changed the dynamics, the communities are now demanding the departure of Solway and that its license should not be renewed. The awareness activities covered five communities including Gbobayee, Dulay, Sehtontuo, Kporlay and Geipa communities targeting youths, women, elders, men and community leaders. The total community's person reached was 365, 186 women, and 179 men.

In further efforts to advocate for and support communities reclaim their rights violated by the awarding of the Solway concession, RICCE hosted meeting with the CFMBs of Zor, Gba and Sehyi along with the Women Environmental Forum to develop a policy brief for submission to the County authority and the FDA on November 18, 2022, in Gbobayee. Participants of the meeting expressed disappointment over violation of community rights in the awarding of the Solway contract. They noted that Solway exploration has brought no benefits to the community; Solway exploration has polluted all the drinking water sources and the company has made no effort to provide safe drinking water to the communities. Based on that concerns and recommendations from communities, RICCE worked with the women group and the CFMBs, a policy brief was written presented to the Nimba County Superintendent Hon. Nelson Korquoi for immediate action.



The brief highlights the absence of Free Prior Informed Consent process in decision -making about the awarding of license to Solway, the grabbing of community land designated for conservation to concession and the aftermath of pollution and destitution of communities as Solway advances its operation. The brief aims to inform policymakers, development partners, and CSOs to review existing MDA and to address community concerns including restoration of social and environmental effects caused by the operation. A Copy of the policy brief is attached to the report as an annex.

Component 2: Contribute to the construction of RICCE resource center at RICCE Sanniquellie Office

Portion of the AJWS grant was allocated as contribution to the construction of a Resource Center at RICCE's Sanniquellie office. Given the proximity of the office to the train track transporting the ArcelorMittal Iron Ore from Yekepa to Buchanan, RICCE observed several cracks in its current office building. Engineers contracted to construct the Resource Center identified potential risks, such as building cracks on RICCE's current office in the same location. This prompted RICCE Board and management to decide on relocation of the office and to stop further investment on said location.

Based on this decision by the board, RICCE through its Executive Director informed AJWS and asked for approval to use the funds "contribution to construction of RICCE resource center" for a purchase of four (4) acres located on Ganta Highway, Sanniquellie City, Nimba County; the land was purchased, surveyed and probated.

Component 3: Technical support to VSLA

As part of RICCE's strategy to ensure sustainability of the project and means of securing equitable benefits sharing from the training programs, RICCE has maintained and supported VSLA formation in the project communities. Two new VSLA groups were established in the two new communities Sehtontuo and Dulay, and the three old VSLA groups restructured in Kpolay, Gbobayee and Geipa communities. RICCE provided VSLA methodology trainings to the new communities and mentorship to the old project communities. RICCE purchased and supplied assorted VSLA materials including VSLA metal boxes, calculators, ledger books, and locks to Dulay and Sehtontuo VSLA and produced VSLA passbook for all five VSLA groups.

VSLA promotes transparency, social cohesion, and provide access to loan opportunity for is members. The VLSA groups are conducting weekly savings in the five communities; the accumulative savings in the five communities is **One Hundred and Thirty-Three Thousand Liberian Dollars (133,000LD)**. **This amount comprises of individual savings of VSLA members and sales of materials produced form the trainings.** The fund is loaned out to interested members with a repayment scheme of 10% interest rate. The availability of this fund is a huge opportunity for women to settle domestic problems including payment of school fees, medical bills etc. In the past women never had the opportunity for borrowing and saving in a transparent manner; though there are traditional savings clubs in the communities the process is difficult as women need to provide collateral and the interest rate was extremely high.

Component 4: Develop RICCE five years strategy plan

RICCE developed Five -Year Strategy Plan during the project. The plan will provide strategic direction to RICCE for the next five years. For the past ten years RICCE was unable to review its existing plan and to redefine its direction, programs and to allocate resources in a way that meet the current reality due to funding constrains. The AJWS project supported us in conducting stakeholders' consultation processes which led to the development of the Strategic Plan. This plan acts as a blueprint for the organization is expected to strengthen our intervention in communities in a more robust but more strategic way in meeting the needs of our beneficiaries. Copy of the draft plan is attached as an annex to the report.

1. What were the key effects or results of these activities?

- 150 women and girls acquired life skills in producing arts and craft which is serving their livelihood and income. The communities are requesting to increase membership per community from 30-50 person.
- 150 women and girls acquired knowledge on women human rights, land rights and ownership and are speaking out on trending communities' issues regarding their rights.
- Policy Brief highlighting the abuse of community's rights was developed and presented to the County Authority for remedial actions.
- The traditional skills training program is building momentum for biodiversity conservation as community realize the importance of NTFPs; they are motivated to sustainably manage the forest so that they can always have them.
- Women are leading conservation initiatives as evident by the call for inclusion of women in the Community Forest guards and reduction in the use of mosquito nets to fishing compared to previous years.
- Increased use of traditional fishing nets, mats, harvesting baskets, weaving bags, made with NTFP have renewed community interest for conservation, communities are demanding Solway's departure and their forest reverted to conservation than concession. Communication was written to the Superintendent advising him not to renew Solway's exploration license in the Blei, Gba and Sehyi Community Forests.

2. What challenges, setbacks or failures did you face implementing these activities? How did you respond to these challenges? (These can be internal to your organization such as staff transition or external such as challenges with external stakeholders or advocacy setbacks due to a political shift.)

- The challenge of full-time staff with better salary to improve productivity of the women is major problem that needs to be addressed. The staff salary under this grant is supplementary which cannot allow us to hire full time staff under the project.
- Purchase of materials for value addition was a challenge because the materials for value added chairs, hand bags wallet, hats are quite expensive and the professional fees for experts teaching value addition also costly.
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3. What have you learned while doing this work? Based on this learning, is your organization making any changes to your organizational goals, strategies, processes and/or future activities? If so, please describe.

- Key lesson learned since the inception of this project is that indigenous people have wealth of knowledge in forest management and conservation, they need support to enable them to continue such practice and need a seat on the table of decision making to strengthen partner's efforts in sustainable natural resource management and governance.
- Community members mostly attach value to project that support livelihood and provide transparent means of benefit sharing. Beneficiaries are excited about the VSLA as it provides means for saving loans opportunity and transparent means of sharing money generated from their sales.
- Women have the desire and willingness to advocate for their rights, but they are mostly afraid of stereotypes from their male counterpart, when they have the opportunity for training and mentorship, women can lead innovative actions.

4. Please provide any feedback about your experience working with AJWS during the grant period or any suggestions for us to improve our grant making approach and partnerships.

We take this time to commend the AJWS family for its funding over the past four years in support of RICCE' gender inclusive forest governance programs. RICCE's gender inclusive forest governance program around the ENNR was idle due to lack of funding; the ArcelorMittal grants which funds RICCE conservation and livelihood programs had no coverage for the women empowerment and inclusive forest governance program. The AJWS funds have made tremendous progress and achievements in promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest management with women leading traditional skills transfer which is rebuilding momentum and interest among local communities for biodiversity conservation and sustainability forest management. Indigenous women are noted for making significant strides in conserving biodiversity and managing natural resources; in case of the ENNR the women were marginalized from decision-making processes and their critical role in managing natural resources went on recognized. The AJWS funding has restored hope to women as women gained knowledge and skills to team up with their male counterpart in governing the ENNR and the surrounding community forests.

In our opinion the AJWS grant making process is flexible and gives independence to grantees to develop their programs and projects. Such non-restrictive process that is not donor driven is likely to make more impacts as its addresses the real issue that confront the people.

Awareness and VSLA sessions



Skill training sessions

Dulay, Sehtontuo and Gbobayee photos below.



Skill training sessions –Kpolay



Policy presentation in Sanniquellie

