

Agro-input Supply and Distribution in Liberia: Challenges, Opportunities and Next steps



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**USAID/FED project
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By:



International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC)



Prepared by

Isaac Kwadwo Asare (Consultant)
IFDC Ghana, Accra
iasare@ifdc.org

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Executive Summary

According to FAO, the Liberia's 14-year civil war has caused large loss of life and widespread displacement. The political situation has since stabilized, allowing refugees and the displaced to return home, while economic growth has been on the upswing. Although agricultural production has increased in recent years, yields are still well below the regional average and food insecurity is high. The abysmal performance is attributed to lack of quality inputs, pest infestations, damaged irrigation and drainage systems and limited capacity in post-harvest processing, especially among small farmers. It is within this context that the USAID-FED project seeks to intervene in the input supply system to ensure farmers have access to quality and affordable agro-inputs in the project counties, focusing on smallholder farmers growing lowland rice, cassava and vegetables.

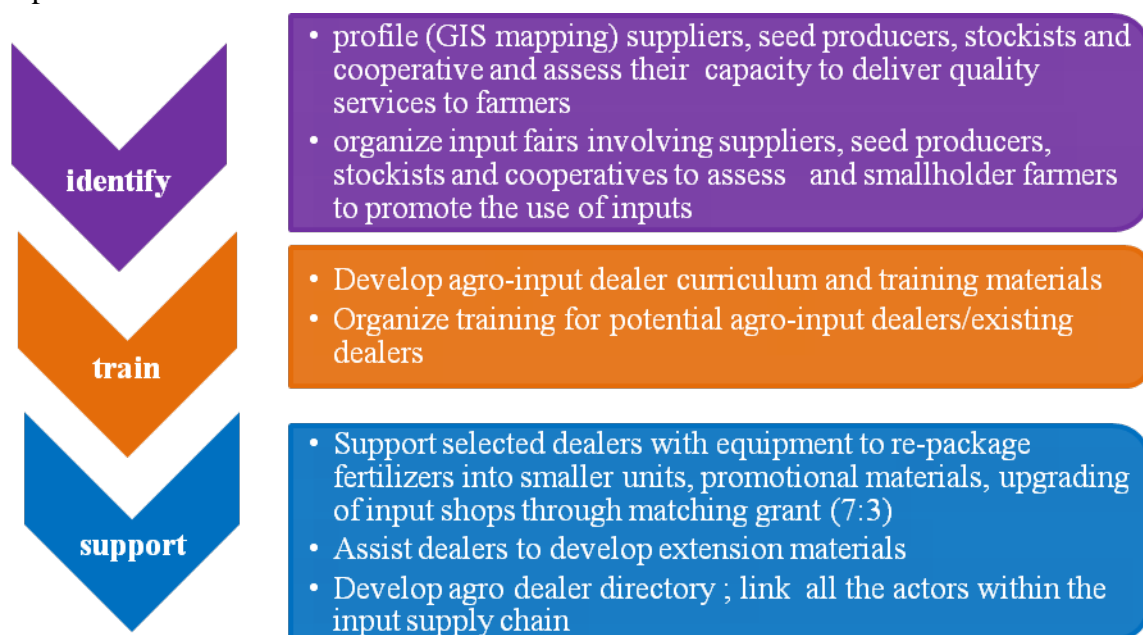
A consultant was engaged by the project to assist in the process of developing the agro-input dealer sector. This consultancy forms an initial 12-day out of 36-day approved by the project. The aim was to identify areas of capacity building for effective grassroots involvement in the input supply system and propose activities towards achieving the project goal of increasing access to smallholder farmers through private agro-input dealer network. This first phase of the consultancy allowed the consultant to understand the background context of Liberia input supply system.

The agro-input dealer sector is characterized by more than 80% importers and a few itinerant traders/retailers in the rural counties. More than 90% of agro-input dealers are found in Monrovia and generally supply agro-inputs to donor agencies/projects and government. It was discovered that donor agencies and NGOs' continuous supply of free inputs, such as fertilizer, seeds, and labor to farmers who participate in their programs deepens the dependency syndrome and thus affects the development of the agricultural sector.

Cost of inputs is generally high which contributes to low input use by smallholder farmers. Some farmers in rural counties have to travel for more than three days to access inputs due to poor transportation system and poor road network. These challenges act as a disincentive for farmers to use modern agro-inputs. Out of the importers interviewed, only Wienco has established distribution points in the FED operational areas. There are stockists and itinerant traders engaged in the sale of agro-inputs. Agro-inputs such as fertilizers are re-packaged into smaller units to meet the pockets of smallholder farmers. The stockists buy their products from Monrovia and neighboring countries such as Guinea. They lack requisite skills in handling of agro-chemicals and fertilizers. It was found that re-packaged fertilizers are of low quality and mixed with foreign materials.

Farmer-based cooperatives present an opportunity to deliver agro-inputs at the door-step of smallholder farmers.

In order to achieve the objectives of the FED project, the following key activities will be implemented:



There is a need to link farmers to output market and build their capacity to produce to meet the market needs and train farmers on the importance of using quality agro-inputs. There will be a need for FED project to collaborate with Government to implement smart subsidy program to bring the cost of fertilizer to bearable minimum (\$USD 25-30) to help farmers purchase fertilizers.

1.0 Introduction

According to FAO, the Liberia's 14-year civil war has caused large loss of life and widespread displacement. The political situation has since stabilized, allowing refugees and the displaced to return home, while economic growth has been on the upswing. Liberia remains one of the world's poorest countries, with nearly two-thirds its population surviving on less than USD 1 a day. It also ravaged the country's social and economic infrastructure, making it difficult for people to access productive inputs, services and markets.

Although agricultural production has increased in recent years, yields are still well below the regional average and food insecurity is high. This abysmal performance is attributed to lack of quality inputs, pest infestations, damaged irrigation and drainage systems and limited capacity in post-harvest processing, especially among smallholder farmers.

It is within this context that the USAID-FED project seeks to intervene in the input supply system to ensure farmers have access to quality and affordable agro-inputs. USAID-FED project seeks to develop the private sector agro-input dealer network that will provide quality, competitively-priced inputs (tools, seed, fertilizer, crop protection products - CPP) and technical information and services to the target farmers in the project counties, focusing on smallholder farmers growing lowland rice, cassava and vegetables.

The International Fertilizer Development Center was subcontracted to provide technical support for the implementation Task1.3: “**Input supply system interventions**” under the USAID-FED project. The specific tasks to be accomplished are:

- Improving access to quality inputs;
- Testing and introduction of new technologies through an improved extension training system in the target areas.

In order to achieve the above tasks, a consultant was engaged by the project to assist in the process of developing the agro-input dealer sector. The aim was to identify areas of capacity building for effective grassroots involvement in the input supply system, which will form the basis for the voucher/smart subsidy program. In order to understand the background context of input supply system in Liberia, the consultant conducted rapid assessment of agro-input supply together with IFDC's focal person in Liberia. The field visits and discussions with the different input supply actors provided information for planning concrete activities till September 2012. This report covers the initial 12-day consultancy approved by the project.

The consultant had discussions with officials at the Ministry of Agriculture at the County level, importers/suppliers of agro-inputs, retailers of agro-inputs at the village level, farmer-based cooperatives, and staff of the USAID-FED project.

2.0 Key Activities

2.1 Actors interviewed by the consultant

- **Government Agencies**

Discussions were held with the County Agricultural offices on input distribution system at the county level. It was revealed that smallholder farmers hardly use fertilizers and agro-chemicals as a result of high cost of fertilizers in Liberia on one hand and lack of access to these inputs on the other hand. It was also revealed that lack of access to extension services by smallholder farmers contributes to low use of agro-inputs. Due to low educational levels by farmers, they are unable to access information on improved farming techniques. It was discovered that donor agencies and NGOs' continuous supply of free inputs, such as fertilizer, seeds, and labor to farmers who participate in their programs deepens the dependency syndrome and thus affects the development of the agricultural sector. Although the Ministry of Agriculture in Liberia has a clear policy against the distribution of free inputs to farmers, this is not generally enforced.

Most farmers who use fertilizers are vegetable, rubber and cocoa plantation farmers. Wienco has initiated a program to help farmers to purchase fertilizers and agro-chemicals to increase productivity of cocoa under a credit scheme (farmers pay back in kind after harvest).

Agro-chemicals are rarely used. Agro-chemicals were recently introduced by Miagro (an agro-chemical company) to farmers for the control of weeds and insect pests. However, some unscrupulous persons used the agro-chemicals as a tool for fishing and subsequently banned by EPA. Some itinerant stockists purchase agro-chemicals from Guinea and sell to farmers. Currently, agro-chemicals can only be used under supervision of agricultural extension officers.

Government has initiated a program, Central Agricultural Research Institute, where farmers are trained as outgrowers to go into seed production. Under the scheme, fertilizers, seeds and tools are supplied to farmers on credit (farmers pay back in kind after harvest). Some individual commercial farms also produce seeds and supply to NGOs and donor agencies for free distribution to farmers. Farmers also use their own seeds whenever possible.

- **Importers/Suppliers**

Miagro

Miagro has been creating awareness on the use of agro-chemicals through demonstrations in rural counties. It deals in agro-chemicals for the control of weeds and insect pest on cocoa, coffee, rice, vegetables, and cotton. It has no distribution points in FED operational areas and relies heavily on the purchase of donor agencies, Government and some large farms.

Gro-Green

It sells seeds (vegetables and maize), tools and equipment, fertilizers (NPK, Urea). The company has in its plan to establish laboratory to conduct soil analysis and fertilizer assess fertilizer quality (nutrient analysis). Its main customers are Government, donor agencies and NGOs, and large commercial farms. It does not have any distribution points in FED operational areas. It has accepted the challenge of opening outlets in rural counties.

Greenfields

It deals in seeds (vegetables and maize), tools and equipment, fertilizers (NPK, Urea). Its main customers are Government, donor agencies and NGOs, and large commercial farms. It does not have any distribution points in FED operational areas.

Wienco

Wienco is only company that has established distribution points in the FED operational areas. It has warehouses with agro-chemicals and fertilizers for cocoa plantation and food crops. Wienco employs agronomists and 13 extension officers across Liberia establishing crop demonstration plots, educating smallholder farmers on good agronomic practices and correct use of fertilizers and agro-chemicals. It has intention to support maize production under an outgrower scheme.

Arjay Farms

The company produces rice seeds under an outgrower scheme and sells to farmers, NGOs and the donor agencies. The company has signed an MOU with FED project to expand its outgrower scheme and increase supply of improved rice varieties to smallholder farmers. The company produced about 11 metric tons of rice seeds under an outgrower scheme last year. It provides technical support to the outgrowers and purchases the rice seeds after production.

- **Agro-input retailers (stockists)**

Aloysius Sumo Business Center

It sells building materials together with tools and equipment for agriculture, agro-chemicals and fertilizers. Fertilizers are re-packaged into smaller units for LRD 15.00 to

meet the pockets of smallholder farmers. The company is located in Gbarnga in the Bong County.

Agricultural Material Business Center

Agricultural Material Business Center is a stockist located in Gbarnga in the Bong County. It deals in fertilizers, seeds (vegetables), agro-chemicals, PPEs, and tools and equipment. It has intention of building a warehouse to stock fertilizers and other agro-inputs. The stockist sells to smallholder farmers and occasionally sells to rubber/cocoa plantation farmers. He buys agro-chemicals from Guinea which to him is cheaper than what is being sold in Monrovia.

• **Potential retail outlets**

Farmer-based cooperatives present an opportunity to deliver agro-inputs at the door-step of smallholder farmers. These cooperatives provide services such as processing of rice, storage and link the members to the output market. What is lacking is the linkage between the members and the input market. During discussions, the cooperatives agreed to establish retail outlets to enable their members to access quality and affordable inputs. The following cooperatives were identified and it is envisaged that more of such cooperatives will be identified and assisted to ensure smallholder farmers to access agro-inputs: Kokoya cooperative, Voinjama cooperative, and Foya cooperative

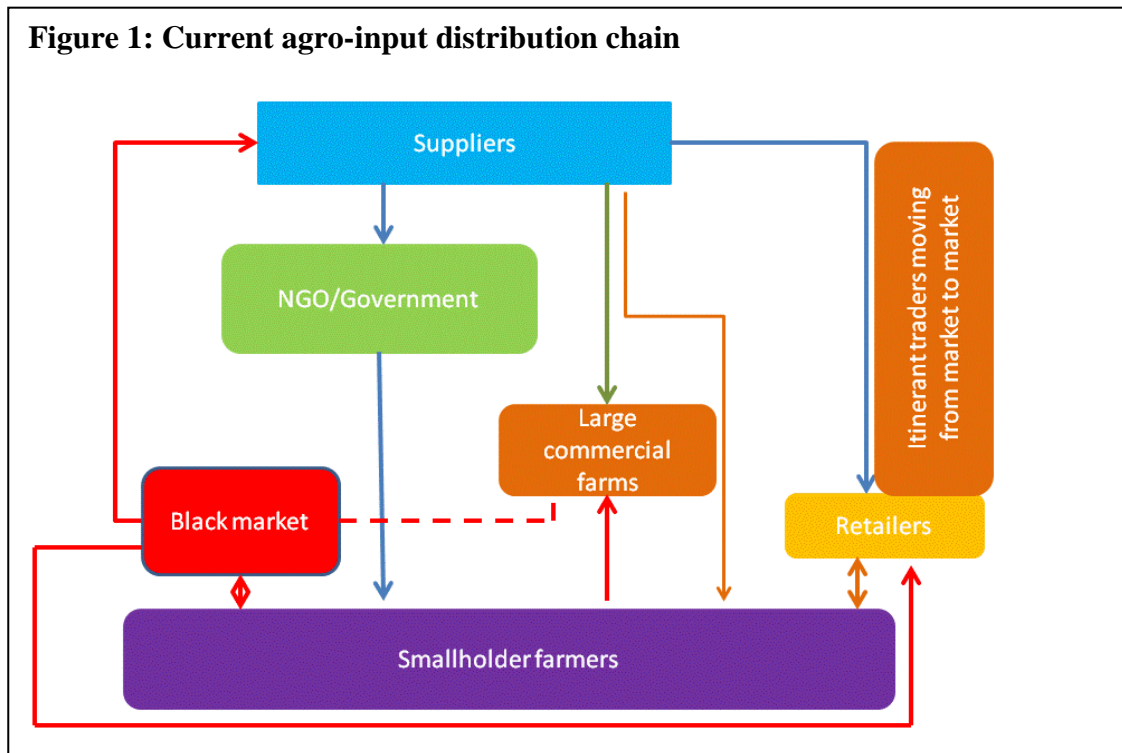
The list of agro-input suppliers, retailers and cooperatives available in appendix

Table1: Organizations and Companies Interviewed

Date	Location	Purpose
July 4-7	Monsterrado County Monrovia Kingsville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet with FED Team • Meet Agro-input suppliers • Meet with seed producers
July 8-9	Bong County Gbarnga Kokoya	Meet with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FED County Team • County Agriculture Coordinator • Local agro-input dealers • Kokoyah Farmers Cooperative
July 9-11	Lofa County Voinjama Foya	Meet with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FED County Team • County Agriculture Coordinator • Foya Farmers Cooperative • Voinjama Farmers Cooperative
July 13	Monrovia	Debriefing
July 14-15	Monrovia	Draft report
July 16	Departure	

2.2 Situational analysis of input supply chain in Liberia

Agro-input dealers play a key role in agriculture and thus their absence affects farmers' access to quality seeds, fertilizers and crop protection products, which invariably affects productivity. The agro-input dealer supply chain in Liberia is in developmental stage. The input supply chain is characterized by few suppliers/importers who are mainly located in Monrovia. Although, more than 20 agro-input dealers are located in Monrovia, about 50% are not functional and only present themselves as agro-input supplier when there is a contract to supply agro-inputs to donor agency or an NGO as indicated in the figure below. The remaining 50% rely heavily on government and donor agencies to purchase their products for distribution to farmers. Thus, few suppliers have made an attempt to establish distribution points in the rural counties of Lofa, Bong and Nimba. Agro-inputs are mainly distributed by donors freely to farmers. The main inputs supplied are fertilizers, equipment and tools, agro-chemicals and certified seeds to farmers.



It must also be pointed out that free distribution of the inputs by donor agencies does not go with educating the farmers (recipient) on the importance of using such products. There is lack of extension services support to these farmers. Suppliers/importers of agro-inputs, Ministry of Agricultural officials testified the distribution of the fertilizers are not targeted to real farmers and thus most of the fertilizers are found in black market; very cheap price which sometimes

some suppliers even purchase from. It makes it difficult for some of the fertilizer importing companies even to compete with their own products; creating a huge market distortion.

There are also few stockists and itinerant traders moving from market to market. Fertilizers and agro-chemicals are repackaged into smaller units. Repackaging into smaller units allow farmers to afford them due to the high cost of agro-inputs. Although repackaging of agro-inputs (fertilizers, seeds and agro-chemicals) by stockists makes it affordable to farmers, it poses great risk to the health of stockists and the farmers. It also makes it easier for unscrupulous persons to engage in adulteration and faking. Farmers complained of lack of local-made hoes and cutlasses, which they find comfortable using rather than the foreign imported ones.

Regulations governing the importation and sale of agro-inputs are not developed and the current guidelines are not being followed by the actors as a result of lack of manpower to monitor and ensure compliance. There is also no laboratory to test the nutrient quality and efficacy of fertilizers and agro-chemicals.

3.0 Challenges and Opportunities

3.1 Challenges

Most farmers have little or knowledge on the importance of using improved inputs such as improved seeds, fertilizers and crop protection products. There is high cost of fertilizers and agro-chemicals, which most farmers cannot afford. Fertilizers sell as high as USD 90.00 per bag of NPK 15:15:15. Smallholder farmers find it easier to bring additional virgin land into cultivation clearing the forest. Shifting cultivation is the main practice of farmers clearing forest every year. At the high cost, only donor and NGOs are able to purchase and distribute freely to farmers. However, most of the fertilizers are found in the market due to lack of targeting of smallholder farmers who need them. Those who need them find it difficult to access these inputs as all the suppliers are located in Monrovia. There is lack of agric extension services and thus farmers do not receive advisory services on correct use of inputs especially on the use of agro-chemicals. Access to credit by farmers is lacking making it difficult for farmers to make the needed investments.

One of the challenges facing the input supply chain is the interventions of free input supply being implemented by NGOs and donor agencies. This distorts the market and makes it difficult for the suppliers to compete with their own products. Smallholder farmers do not value the use of fertilizer as a result of lack of knowledge on the importance of fertilizers. Suppliers also complain of high import duty on agro inputs. Lack of good roads to transport inputs serves as a hindrance for effective distribution of agro inputs. There exist no regulations on the sale of agro-inputs.

There is a high cost of renting warehouse to serve as distribution points for suppliers. There is high incidence of faking and adulteration of fertilizers and agro-chemicals. This acts as disincentive for farmers to use fertilizers and agro-chemicals because these inputs would not produce the desired results leading to total rejection by farmers.

There are opportunities for agro-input dealer business to thrive in Liberia due to low yield as a result of decline in soil fertility.

There is also insect pest attack on crops example termites (coffee, cocoa, rice). Farmers complained on weed control methods currently employed in weeding rice farmers as drudgery, and labor intensive.

Figure 2: Fertilizers sold by stockists



Figure 3: Maize farm showing signs of nutrient deficiency



3.2 Opportunities for expanding access to agro-inputs

There are stockists and itinerant traders engaged in the sale of agro-inputs. These stockists buy their products from Monrovia and Guinea. Fertilizers and agro-chemicals are repackaged in smaller units to meet the pockets of the smallholder farmers. The stockist has fertilizers, agro-chemicals, tools, seeds mostly vegetable seeds and personal protection equipment. At the Bong County, only two stockists were identified. One of these stockists trades in agro-input products while the other stocks agro-input products in addition to building materials and spare parts.

They lack requisite skills in handling of agro-chemicals and fertilizers. It was found that repackaged fertilizers are of low quality and mixed with foreign materials. There is therefore the need to build the capacity of these stockists to provide quality services to smallholder farmers in the rural counties of Liberia.

Figure 4: A stockist, Peter Juah, at Gbarnga in Bong County

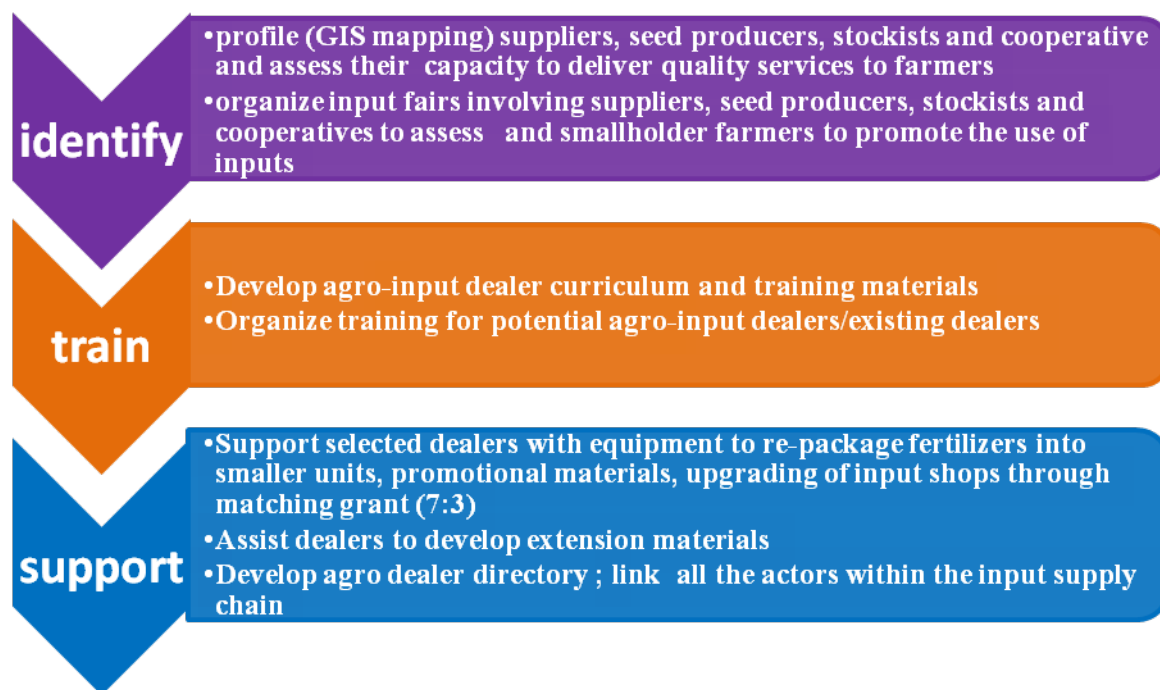


Cooperatives

Cooperatives are one of the main channels of information related to agriculture at the community level. Cooperatives also provide, processing, storage, and marketing services to their members. The cooperatives have warehouses and offices which can be used as input distribution point. Discussions held with some members of the cooperatives revealed that smallholder farmers were willing to pay for the cost of inputs. They however indicated they would not be able to afford the high cost of fertilizers and agro-chemicals. And thus, there is a need to half the cost to bring the cost to affordable level. Kokoya, Voinjama, Foya cooperatives have been identified as conduit for making inputs accessible to smallholder farmers.

4.0 Next Steps

The strategy to the development of the private input supply system hinges on three main complementary activities (see appendix II for detailed activity implementation plan):



4.1 Identify business opportunities and assess the needs of actors

This objective of this activity is to provide business opportunities to importers/suppliers of agro-input dealers to expand their services to the smallholder farmers in the rural communities. This activity involves GIS mapping and assess the needs of all the actors in the input supply chain. The output of this activity will be GIS maps showing the locations of agro-input dealer sales points various actors. Report on the need assessment which will feed into the development of

training materials and to tailor appropriate support to meet the needs of various actors. It will also feed into the production of agro-input dealer directory of sales points.

Accessibility of the data to seed producers, input distributors and importers will help improve business linkages, as the data is essential for evidence-based decisions to be made by the value chain actors. The project will organise a sensitization workshop to share the outcome of the mapping exercise and present agribusiness opportunities available in the three Counties to agro-input retailers, distributors and importers of agro-inputs.

4.2 Train agro-input dealers in three Counties to offer quality services

There is a need to build capacity of potential agro-input dealers to provide quality services to farmers by improving their knowledge on agro inputs and business management. Cooperatives should be trained on contracting and collective marketing as well as demand pooling of agro inputs. Strengthening capacities of existing and new private agro-dealers will enable them provide quality inputs and advice on their appropriate use, and thereby become agents that can transfer agricultural technologies.

Development of curriculum and training materials

In collaboration with importers of agro-input and the Ministry of Agriculture FED project will develop curriculum for training of agro-input dealers. The curriculum will consist of:

- Product knowledge, safety and handling,
- Salesmanship and marketing,
- Business skill and financial / inventory management,
- Logistics planning and delivery, and
- Technologies of input use, crop production, processing and marketing.

Train agro-input dealers on technical knowledge and business management

A four-day training program will be organized for potential agro-input dealers in Monrovia to improve their business skills and efficiency and profitability in the production, importation, and distribution of seed, fertilizer and other inputs. The training will be based on adult-learning methodologies employing practical approach and hands-on exercise. Participants will be awarded with certificate of participation with signature from the Ministry of Agriculture. The trained and certified dealer will have the capacity to serve farmers with quality inputs, while providing recommendations and provide them with appropriate agro inputs application regime.

Agro input dealers will be assisted to produce bankable business plan to attract loans from the commercial banks. The cooperatives are willing to pay for some of their members to pay for attending the agro dealer training course.

Development of agro dealer directory

After training of the agro-input dealers, a directory will be developed and distributed to smallholder farmers, Ministry of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency, input suppliers to create the awareness of the existence of agro-input dealers. The Government agencies would be in the position to monitor the activities of the agro-input dealers. It will also help farmers to access agro-input dealers through the use of mobile phone. The directory will contain information on safe use of agro-chemicals and fertilizers. It will also contain information on approved list of agro-chemicals for controlling insect pests and weeds approved for use by USAID for the FED project.

4.3 Support agro-input dealers to open sales points in rural areas

Once the agro-input dealers have been identified, needs assessment will be undertaken to help shape the types of facilities and capacity strengthening needs to be provided by the project. In order to reduce the distance farmers travel to access agro-inputs, there is a need to give incentives to existing agro-input dealers and the youth who are interested in opening agro-input dealer sales points in the rural areas. The project will provide start-up capital to support new agro-input dealers to expand their operations to the rural areas.

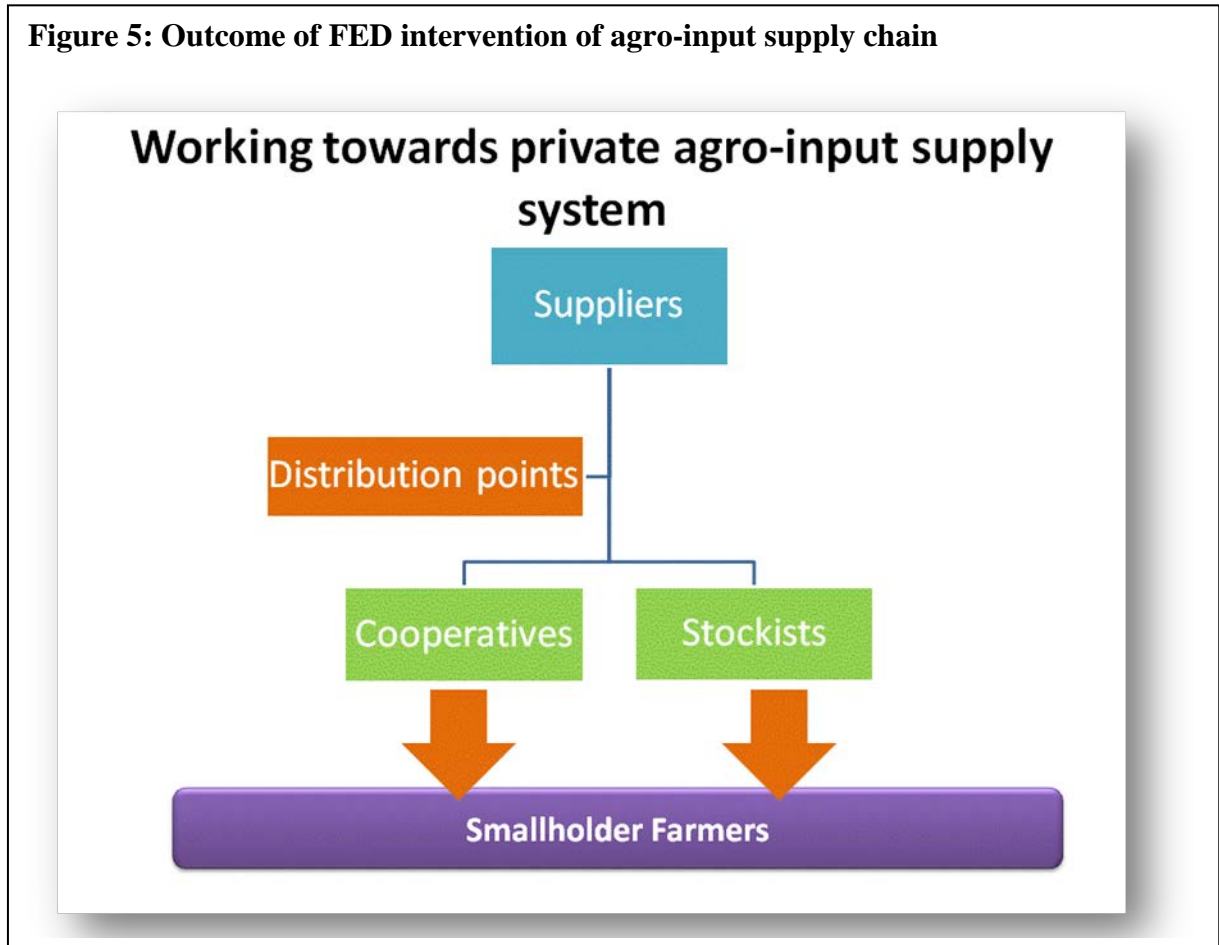
A cursory analysis of existing potential retail outlets revealed that there will be a need for minimal upgrading of facilities and business skills to effectively deliver services. The project will support agro-input dealers with start-up capital towards the provision of a shop (infrastructure), equipment for re-packaging of fertilizers, promotional materials through matching grant facility. To do this, the project will set up matching grant fund to assist in the establishment of new agro-input dealer sales points of ratio of 7:3 (project provides 70% of the total cost of setting up agro dealer shop while the agro-input dealers provides 30%).

Promote the use of agro-inputs through demand creation activities

Demand creation – training of farmers, establishing demonstration plots, development of agro dealer directory, development of extension materials, radio programs, input fairs will help create the needed awareness.

An expected outcome of these intervention will be suppliers/importers of agro-inputs, distributors, and retailers consisting of a stockist and cooperatives (who have added to their service portfolio input marketing) ensuring timely access to quality and affordable agro-inputs as indicated in figure

Figure 5: Outcome of FED intervention of agro-input supply chain



5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The agro-input dealers are located in Monrovia with few stockists at the community level in the rural areas. Most of the smallholder farmers do not have access to quality inputs due to high cost of agro-inputs on one hand and lack of knowledge on the correct use of these inputs on the other hand. The Ministry of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency have provided guidelines to guide the consumption of fertilizers and agro-chemicals in the absence of Law governing the import, sale and use of agro-inputs. However, these guidelines are not enforced due to lack of staffs, tools and equipment to effectively monitor the activities of agro-input dealers.

The free distribution of agro-inputs by donor agencies has negative impact on the business of importers and this will not help the development of village level stockist. The absence of

extension support services affect the proper utilization of inputs from the donor agencies and thus farmers do not find the need to use and sell fertilizers cheaply at the black market.

The next steps will be to develop the existing network of agro-input dealers and rope in cooperatives to assist in the distribution of agro-chemicals to smallholder farmers. The main activities to be carried out are;

- Identify and assess the needs of existing agro-input dealers including the cooperatives
- Train the agro-input dealers to offer quality services to farmers
- Support agro-input dealers to expand their services to other underserved areas through matching grant.

5.2 Recommendations

- There is a need to link farmers to output market and build their capacity to produce to meet the market needs and train farmers on the importance of using quality agro-inputs.
- There is a need to assess the available agro-chemicals and recommend for use by farmers those approved by USAID for the FED project
- Collaborate with Government to implement smart subsidy program to help farmers purchase fertilizers (\$USD 25-30)
- Collaborate with other donor agencies to reduce/stop free supply of fertilizers, tools, and improved seeds to farmers
- Identify and encourage local manufacturers of agric implements (hoe and cutlass)

Appendix I: List of agro-input dealers

No.	Name	Scale of operation	Address	Telephone number	Products sold
1	Greenfield Liberia Inc.	Importer/wholesaler	Capitol Bye-Pass, Monrovia	0886666600 0886524400	Fertilizer, agro-chemical, tools and equipment
2	Gro Green (Ralph Hamm)	Importer/wholesaler	Capital Bye-Pass, Monrovia	0880555552 0776555552	Fertilizer, agro-chemical, tools and equipment
3	Wienco (Samuel Oduro-Asare)	Importer/wholesaler	P. O. Box 1998, 1000 Monrovia 10, Liberia	0880845440	Fertilizers, agro-chemicals, personal protective clothing,
4	Miagro (Michael Agbata)	Importer/wholesaler	Elwa Junction, Adjacent Isaac Davies High school Paynesville, Monrovia	06819316 +2348035970045	Agro-chemicals
5	Arjay Farms Inc. (Josephine George-Francis)	Seed producer	Kingsville, Montserrant County	0886510285	Rice seeds
6	Aloysius Sumo Business Center (Aloysius Sumo)	Retailer	Central market, Gbarnga	0886441308 0776988560	Agro-chemicals, tools and equipment, fertilizers
7	Agricultural Material Business Center (Peter Juah)	Retailer	Ganta Parking, Gbarnga	0776386857	Agro-chemicals, tools and equipment, seeds, fertilizers
8	Green Farms	Importer/wholesaler	Corner of Broad & Johnson St. Monrovia	0886512646	Agro-chemicals, tools and equipment, seeds, fertilizers
POTENTIAL RETAIL POINTS					
9	Kokoya Cooperative	Farmer based cooperative	Kokoya, Bong County	0886784358	Cultivate rice, rice processing
10	Voinjama Cooperative	Farmer based cooperative	Voinjama, Lofa County	0886590204	Cultivate rice, rice processing
11	Foya Cooperative	Farmer based cooperative	Foya, Lofa County	0886458288	Cultivate rice, oil palm plantation, rice processing,

Appendix II: Activity implementation plan

Activity	Timeline												
	2012						2013						
	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Organize input fairs involving suppliers, seed producers, stockists	■	■											
Profile (GIS mapping) suppliers, seed producers, stockists and cooperative and assess their capacity to deliver quality services to farmers			■										
Define appropriate support systems (matching grant) documentation			■	■									
Develop agro-input dealer curriculum and training materials			■	■	■	■							
Organize training for potential agro-input dealers/existing dealers							■	■	■				
Develop agro dealer directory ; link all the actors within the input supply chain								■	■	■			
Implement the support systems to selected agro-input dealers									■	■			
Assist dealers to develop extension materials											■	■	■