

MISSION MOMENT: EVEN IN THE HUNGRY SEASON

In west Africa, the people of Sierra Leone and Liberia suffer from chronic and recurring food insecurity, especially during the 'hungry season' just before the annual harvest. Extreme and persistent poverty – more than 50% of the population live on less than \$1.25 per day – is noted as the most significant factor contributing to the scale of food insecurity.

At the same time, pervasive inequities severely limit women's access to educational and occupational opportunities, preventing their full participation in the workforce and in the development of their communities. School attendance rates are lower for girls, resulting in women with lower literacy and educational levels when compared to men.

As part of their West Africa Initiative, supported by Week of Compassion, global ecumenical partner Agricultural Missions Inc (AMI) is hard at work to address both concerns at the community level.

Consulting with youth and village leaders, AMI secured land and worked with youth groups to submit operational plans. After training, youth organize themselves to construct storage facilities, and to cultivate, harvest and store crops. The young farmers learn to develop guidelines and schedules for food distribution, follow best practices for production and sale, and create an emergency food reserve that is replenished annually. The most important lesson learned is that the youth are eager to engage in farming. Many youth want to farm and remain in their communities if they have the support to do so. While local communities have little control over the impact of climate change, lack of infrastructure, or other systemic conditions, as a result of the Youth Agriculture Program, participating communities have shown they can impact their own food security.

We are very happy for our project, especially the storage we built ... I believe that it could enable us to continue farming at all seasons, and our products and tools will be safe. I will grow more in the next season by the Grace of God. ... We have food all the time, even in the hungry



season. If some people are sick or the old people cannot work, I can help them with food to eat. I can even earn more money by keeping rice until the price is good and then I sell some to get money to send my children to school. - Annie, youth leader

Following a similar relationship-building cohort and community-based response model, community stakeholders (parents, schools, community leaders) identify girls who are at risk for dropping out of school and provide support for uniforms, books, and school supplies, and have established peer counseling units for high school students. The drop-out rate among participants is less than 1% (compared to the national rate of 17%).

With strong participation in the village-based awareness sessions on reducing gender-based violence, leaders report a reduction in incidents, and most were handled within community-based systems established for intervention.

Most girls drop out after completing primary school because their parents cannot afford the cost... Many soon become pregnant or are married off by their parents to ease the financial burden of supporting them... poverty often forces these choices. The school support program helps many girls stay in school We also now see less men abusing their wives because the program is teaching both men and women of the laws against this practice. The chiefs and community leaders are leading the way in this effort. - Santigie, facilitator

Week of Compassion continues to pursue the things that make for hope and peace – things that are true, honorable, and just. We eagerly share stories of hope, telling of what we have HEARD AND SEEN: that communities know their needs best, and with support and resources, can create their own paths to new opportunities. Week of Compassion makes an impact around the world, ensuring that the stories, needs, and celebrations of vulnerable communities are heard and seen – and that we respond.

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