



Liberia's Forest Sector: A New Window of Opportunity

global witness

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Summary

Liberia is home to globally significant forests and most of its people depend on them for their livelihoods. But the restarting of large-scale timber extraction in the country has proven disastrous for local people, the environment, and efforts to strengthen governance. The sector has resoundingly failed to generate the expected revenues, jobs and local benefits, while foreign-backed logging companies have routinely ignored reforms and broken laws in collusion with government officials. Recent actions by the President and her government to address these failures provide a brief window of opportunity to bring about profound and lasting positive change for Liberia's forests, the communities that depend on them, and the wider economy. As made clear by Liberia's new Land Rights Policy and underlined by recent attempts by logging companies to exploit communities to gain illegal access to communally-owned forests, any solution must have local communities at its centre. The Government of Liberia, those involved in the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) process, and the international donor community alike must seize the opportunity to develop strategies that support communities and take into account and preserve the critical local and global benefits that Liberia's rainforests provide.

Context

Since its timber-financed civil war ended in 2003, Liberia has yet to institute a system of forest management that benefits all Liberians. Despite a series of promising legal reforms beginning in 2006, the government has prioritised large, export-oriented logging concessions. These have failed to deliver the expected revenues,¹ jobs, and benefits to communities and the wider economy.² The logging companies that received large concessions in 2008-9 have failed to meet their contractual obligations and several have since been involved in systematic violations of Liberian law. Meanwhile, community forestry remains 'little more than a discussion point'³ and production for the far more extensive domestic market is ignored.

The 2007 National Forest Strategy 'largely ignores production for the domestic market. With the exception of the period 2000-2003, Liberia's historic wood production for domestic utilization has generally exceeded export production on a volumetric basis. Current estimates of the forest sector's contribution to real GDP for the period 2010-2014 show the contribution of the domestic market as three or more times greater than that from export'.

— 2012 World Bank Liberia Forest Sector Diagnostic⁴

Encouragingly, President Johnson Sirleaf took firm steps in early 2013 to stop the worst of the abuses by issuing Executive Order 44. The order recognised the harm to the national interest brought about by the breakdown in the rule of law in the forest sector. In doing so, it also opened a window of opportunity for Liberia to create a system that brings genuine sustainable development benefits to the country and its rural communities while preserving its globally important forests.

But to succeed, the lessons of the past need to be taken seriously by the Government of Liberia, civil society, and the international donor community alike.

Window of opportunity

Other developing countries have already moved in the direction Liberia needs to head. Globally, the proportion of forest under community ownership or management has increased from 21% to 31% since 2002.⁵ This trend will certainly continue, as countries gradually decentralise governance structures and communities secure tenure rights to their land and forests.

'... there is a greater likelihood of a forest providing higher subsistence livelihood benefits to local populations, and also having higher levels of biodiversity, when local forest users have a right to participate in forest governance by making rules over the management and use of the forest.'

— Systematic review published in the journal *Science*⁶

Liberia has already put in place many of the building blocks required for a truly sustainable forest management system. Its Community Rights Law and new Land Rights Policy provide a progressive legal and policy framework for protecting communities' social and economic livelihoods.⁷ The Voluntary Partnership Agreement with the European Union has the potential to promote an inclusive process to strengthen national forest governance and institutions with communities at the centre.

Alongside policy reforms, USAID and others have supported several pilot projects to demonstrate the potential for community-centred approaches to forest management that are far more progressive than the revenue-share arrangements common to the large-scale concessions and that lock local people in a patron-client relationship with logging companies.

'Much better to empower communities to generate their own incomes from forests and land than to lease it out to unscrupulous logging companies.'

— comment from a Liberian NGO community worker

What needs to be done?

There are, however, a number of additional changes that need to take place before Liberia can become a regional leader in new, more holistic ways of managing forests:

- **Introduce participatory land-use planning and end the preferential treatment for large-scale forest and land concessions**

The inter-ministerial competition to hand out large-scale forest and land concessions that trample on ordinary people's rights and livelihoods has to stop. Instead, a broad and inclusive approach to land-use planning must be implemented. Liberia committed to 'a broadened approach to land suitability undertaken collaboratively between mineral, agricultural and forestry sectors'⁸ in its 2012 Readiness Preparation Proposal. Such an approach must have sustainable, low-carbon development and community rights and participation as driving principles.

- **Build institutional capacity within the Forest Development Authority to support communities**

The FDA needs to build strong cadre of staff with the ability to advocate for and support community management of forests. This should underpin a broader process of institutional reform that regards forests as national assets with local and global values that far surpass that offered by export markets for timber.

In tandem, Liberian NGOs must grow their technical capacities in order to complement their current policy advocacy work with on-the-ground support to community-based forest initiatives.

- **Increase engagement and dialogue with Liberia's forest communities**

People have lived in and depended on forests for generations and in Liberia as elsewhere communities have longstanding customary rules for how their natural resources should be used.⁹ To ensure solutions last longer than external support does, a better understanding of entrenched social and institutional barriers that keep forest communities poor, and the unique perspectives they bring to the table, are needed.

This will require a proper accounting of the contribution of the informal economy to local employment and wealth generation, and a deeper analysis of the magnitude and nature of the domestic market for timber and non-timber forest products. Although absent from macro-economic analyses, such informal and local level activity undoubtedly makes a direct economic contribution.

- **Reduce bureaucratic and technical barriers to obtaining community forest management rights**

The experience of pilot community forests clearly shows that the barriers to obtaining community forest management rights are too high. This is consistent with experience from elsewhere: '...unnecessarily demanding requirements for forest management plans [are] a constraint to realizing the potential benefits

from community forestry'.¹⁰ Communities have to make significant efforts to meet the technical requirements and procedures demanded by the FDA, and this diverts energy away from more critical aspects like internal community capacity building, governance, and defence against corruption. The procedures for securing the right to collectively manage forests needs to be simplified so as to reassert the critical importance of communities in decision-making.

Conclusion

The long history of predatory companies exploiting Liberia's forest communities and the current lapses in rule of law threaten what remains of Liberia's globally significant Upper Guinean Forest. The failure to take an integrated approach to the 'Three Cs' policy – communities, conservation and commerce – has resulted in a marginalisation of community forest management and a laissez-faire attitude toward commercial forestry. President Johnson Sirleaf's official recognition of these deficiencies presents a brief window of opportunity for Liberia to take a leadership role in Africa on securing land rights and scaling up community management of forests.

'Let it be clear that I remain committed to protecting our people and ensuring that our natural resources are used to benefit the country and communities in which those resources are found.'
— President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf¹¹

References

- ¹ SGS/Liberfor reports indicate that as of August 2013, companies owed the state US\$ \$43,772,657 in arrears on FMCs and TSCs, most of which is the bid premium, an annual payment companies themselves offered to make during the competitive concession allocation process. In 2012, the government brought in a mere \$3.74 million in revenues from commercial logging for export. This figure excludes revenues for timber cut and exported under illegal PUPs and does not take into account the 19% fee paid to SGS/Liberfor for managing the Chain of Custody system.
- ² For a discussion of the limited nature and poor quality of jobs and other benefits to local communities generated by FMCs, see: World Bank, 'Update of Rapid Social Assessment: High Expectations – Elusive Benefits: Commercial Forestry and Communities in Liberia', 2011.
- ³ LRCFP, 'Final Evaluation of the Land Rights and Community Forestry Program', 2011, USAID Liberia, p.39; http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pdact242.pdf.
- ⁴ World Bank, 'Liberia Forest Sector Diagnostic', December 2012, p.9.
- ⁵ Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), 'Landowners or Laborers: What choice will developing countries make?', Annual Review, 2013, p.13; www.rightsandresources.org/documents/files/doc_5714.pdf.
- ⁶ Lauren Persha, Arun Agrawal, Ashwini Chhatre, 'Social and Ecological Synergy: Local Rulemaking, Forest Livelihoods, and Biodiversity Conservation'; *Science* 25 March 2011: Vol. 331 no. 6024 pp. 1606-1608; www.sciencemag.org/content/331/6024/1606.abstract.
- ⁷ Liberia Land Commission, 'Land Rights Policy', 2013, p.6; www.landlib.org/doc_download/Land%20Rights%20Policy%20Final%20Final%20Final.pdf?4705305cd27e04fb1f66830e7e0ef9d=NDk%3D.
- ⁸ Government of Liberia, 'Readiness Preparation Proposal', 2012; www.forestcarbonpartnership.org/fcp/sites/forestcarbonpartnership.org/files/Documents/PDF/Apr2012/Liberia%20R-%20PPP_revised_April%202012.pdf.
- ⁹ LRCFP, *op. cit.*, p.51.
- ¹⁰ FAO 'Simpler Forest Management Plans for Participatory Forestry', 2004, p.1; <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/j4817e/j4817e00.pdf>.
- ¹¹ President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf speaking at a consultative meeting with the Ministries of Justice, Lands and Mines, Finance and the Land Commission, quoted in a statement by Counsellor Benedict F. Sannoh delivered at a press briefing on 4 January 2013; www.micatliberia.com/index.php/media/speeches/1118-statement-by-cllr-benedict-f-sannoh-delivered-at-micat-press-briefing-on-the-pup-report.