



Land Grab or Responsible Development? Oil Palm Concessions in Liberia

In late February 2012, the Liberian government sent representatives to a meeting with community leaders in Madina, Grand Cape Mount County, to discuss Sime Darby activities in the area. "We are not saying Sime Darby should leave," said one human right activist. "But there are thing the government must address."¹ One suggestion made was extra training for government negotiators. "They should really think about their citizens first," said a coordinator for the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI), "how much the citizens of the country are losing by this contract? Let that question be clearly answered before any contract is signed."

Just three months later, Sime Darby agreed during meetings on May 3 and May 8, 2012, in Grand Cape Mount to remove oil palm trees from the swamps surrounding some of the villages within the plantation area.² This would allow villagers to replant rice in the swamps. However, the villagers subsequently rejected the five swamp plots designated by Sime Darby for rice, claiming that the plots were not properly ploughed and the rains too heavy to allow for planting at that time.

Sime Darby steadfastly denied that it had broken any laws, engaged in a land grab or otherwise engaged in any questionable behavior in Liberia. Instead, it stressed in a statement posted to its website in February 2012 a pledge to practice sustainable agriculture, and stated its commitment to "regular and direct engagement with communities, adherence to national laws and regulations, environmental stewardship and the use of best agricultural practices." The Liberian concession area, it argued, "is mostly abandoned agricultural land neglected during the civil wars, and degraded forests."³

Meanwhile, Sime Darby had applied to develop 20,000 hectares in Gbarpolu County for palm oil. However, the Environmental Protection Agency as of July 2012 had not approved the

¹ Chris Simpson, "Liberia: The Plantation Blues," *allAfrica*, February 29, 2012. See: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201203010084.html>

² Silas Kpanana' Ayoung Siakor, *Uncertain Futures: The Impacts of Sime Darby on Communities in Liberia*, Sustainable Development Institute, August 2012, p.37. Other information in this paragraph is also from this source.

³ From Sime Darby website. See: http://www.simedarby.com/False_and_Inaccurate_Reports_on_Liberian_Operations.aspx.

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company's Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) on the grounds that the ESIA did not stipulate specifically which 20,000 hectares Sime Darby intended to develop.

In November 2012, community representatives from across the country gathered in Bopolu City in Gbarpolu to discuss the impact of palm oil development on land owned by local communities. The event was jointly organized by SDI, the Save My Future Foundation (SAMFU) and Social Entrepreneurs for Sustainable Development (SESDev).⁴ Representatives attended from Bomi, Grand Cape Mount and Gbarpolu counties, among others. The meeting resulted in a declaration which demanded respect for the rights and livelihoods of those affected by oil palm development.

The declaration said, among other things, that local communities "were not consulted prior to the government signing the contracts with oil palm companies," that "contracts are not transparent, with unrealistic terms and conditions, and do not respect our rights to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent," and that "we now realize that oil palm development does not directly benefit us and is carried out in a way that damages our lives, our communities, and our heritage."⁵ The declaration set out 28 demands for the government regarding current and future palm oil land concessions.

As of December 2012, no development had yet occurred in Gbarpolu County.

⁴ Forest Peoples Programme, *Community meeting on palm oil in Liberia leads to strong declaration on further palm oil development in Liberia*, December 10, 2012. See: <http://www.forestpeoples.org/topics/palm-oil-rspo/news/2012/12/community-meeting-palm-oil-liberia-leads-strong-declaration-furthe>

⁵ For a copy of the declaration, see: http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/news/2012/12/Declaration%20on%20Oil%20Palm%20Liberia_November%202012.pdf