



April 2012

Farmers make their voices heard on large land investments in Sierra Leone

It was the very first opportunity for Sierra Leoneans affected by the recent wave of large land deals in the country to find their collective voice and to make it heard.

Ninety farmers from all over the country — women, men, young and old — made their way to the capital Freetown and crowded into the small hall at St. Edwards School on the 2nd and 3rd of April 2012 to share their experiences on how large-scale foreign investments in farmland are affecting them. They came from eight districts and 20 chiefdoms where foreign investors have leased vast tracks of farmland, most for 50 years with a possible extension of 21.

The occasion was the first-ever national conference of landowners and land-users in Sierra Leone, an event organized by the Sierra Leonean NGO Green Scenery together with the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF).

Participants clearly relished this opportunity and repeatedly expressed their enormous gratitude for the opportunity to meet with fellow Sierra Leoneans to find a common strategy to defend their rights to their land, water and food. By the time they had finished two days of intensive discussions, they had developed and unanimously adopted a communiqué that listed their eight main concerns and the eight recommendations that they hope will end the suffering that the land deals are causing them. Every single participant endorsed the statement with a signature or, for those unable to write, a thumbprint.

Green Scenery estimates that these land investments, involving about 20 large-scale investors from the UK, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the US, now cover at least one million hectares. That's about 18 percent of the arable land in Sierra Leone.

In 2011, as part of its investigations into large land investments across Africa, the US-based Oakland Institute (OI) published a study of foreign investment in land in Sierra Leone. It showed that most investments were for industrial plantations, for agrofuel from sugar cane, for crude palm oil and for rubber.¹ More recently other investors have acquired large land holdings for rice production.² One even claims to have purchased 3000 acres,³ which is not legal in Sierra Leone.

The Oakland Institute provided the financial support that made the conference possible and covered travel and accommodation costs for the participants.

The question: who benefits from the land deals in Sierra Leone?

In her intervention at the opening ceremony, Christian Aid representative, Marie-Luise Schueller, said that Sierra Leone could only benefit from the land deals when government coffers were full because the investors were paying their fair share of taxes, and when people were not losing their land and livelihoods. She earned a

prolonged round of applause when she said, “We don’t want people to become slaves on their own land. That’s what people are telling me, ‘we are now slaves on our own land’.”

Mohamed Conteh, National Coordinator of SILNoRF, said that there is a need for investment in agriculture in Sierra Leone to ensure food security and sustainable development. But by all indications, in this kind of foreign investment in land, the investors are the only ones winning anything. He said the question to be answered is “Who benefits from the land deals?” He contended that it is not poor farmers, rather they find themselves competing with powerful foreign investors. This, he said, jeopardizes both farmers and the right to food in Sierra Leone, which in 2011 ranked 180th of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. ⁴

Sierra Leone is still struggling to rebuild itself after a long civil war that ended ten years ago. The war, fuelled by trade in “blood diamonds”, was in part the outcome of many years of poor management of natural resources and a deficit of democracy and justice in the country. Urban elites had excluded impoverished rural people from decision-making.

During the 1970s and 1980s, political stagnation and structural adjustment programs caused a precipitous decline in agricultural production and rural infrastructure. Support programs to smallholder farmers were cut, and liberalized trade led to the dumping of cheap, subsidized produce from abroad, which undermined local farmers. Once an exporter of food, including the staple rice, Sierra Leone became dependent on food imports.

While Sierra Leone remains a net importer of food, the country has been seeing improvements in its production. In 2011 agriculture, primarily smallholder farming accounted for 51 percent of the GDP. It employs about 3.5 million people, roughly two-thirds of the population.⁵ Food security remains a top government priority under President Ernest Bai Koroma’s “Agenda for Change,” but debate continues as to how agricultural development and food security can best be achieved.

While the government of Sierra Leone says it is now supporting farmers with its smallholder commercialization program, at the same time it is promoting massive foreign direct investment in farmland in the country. It claims this will not harm smallholders or food security. Participants at the conference strongly disputed this.

Growing fears and a call for a hold on new land deals

According to Joseph Rahall, Executive Director of Green Scenery, over the two days of discussions, the participants listed more than 100 “fears” about the land deals. These ranged from consternation over the overwhelming negative impacts on women who lose their livelihoods and food production, and whose mental and physical health suffers immensely, to the effect on children’s education who have to drop out of school because their mothers can no longer pay their school fees. They spoke of increased hunger, rising food prices and despoiled water supplies.

Participants also spoke out against the nefarious role that some Paramount Chiefs play in signing away their people’s land and coercing them to accept. They said there is a total absence of free prior and informed consent about the deals, which result in people’s eviction from their own farmland. They bemoaned the devastating environmental effects of the investors’ operations that pollute water and air, result in cutting of trees and exacerbated wind and soil erosion, loss of medicinal plants and wildlife habitat. There were also concerns about the way such deals and industrial plantations tear at the social fabric of rural communities, resulting in marriage breakdowns, unwanted teenage pregnancies, increased incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as loss of self-esteem when one loses one’s self-employment.

These the participants then boiled down into major concerns and recommendations in their final communiqué that they are now passing on to the Government of Sierra Leone for consideration, and, hopes Rahall, action.

The final communiqué calls on government to review all the agreements relating to land and to ensure no deals are made without full free, prior and informed consent of and consultation with all members of the affected communities. It also says that local communities require independent legal counsel before any deals are made, that environmental protection is enforced to protect land, water, vegetation and wildlife resources on which people depend, and demands that traditional rulers, particularly Paramount Chiefs, do not block consultation between communities and investors. Further, it decries any land deals that increase hunger and food insecurity.

The conference also saw the launch of a new watchdog group to monitor land investments throughout the country and sensitize communities. It is a network of civil society organizations and land-user associations called Action for Large-Scale Land Acquisition Transparency, or ALLAT.

“If the name of our network sounds like ‘ALERT’,” said Rahall, “that’s because we need an alert on this issue. We think that land issues are conflict issues.”

Passionate exchanges, remarkable admissions

Already at the opening ceremony, the mood was emotional and often tense. Many of the questions were passionate pleas for the government to stop the land deals.

“How are we going to get food security if you give all the upland land to the investors? We beg you to listen to us,” said one woman farmer who has lost her cropland to the giant Swiss investor, Addax Bioenergy. “We are suffering because we have nowhere to go. You come out from war, build a house and now when you speak out, they lock you up.”

She was addressing her question to the Deputy Director of Agriculture, Amara Sheriff, who stood in for the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security as keynote speaker at the opening ceremony. The minister, he said, was unable to attend because he was “busy with other state matters”.

The only member of parliament participating in the conference was Sheka Musa Sama, of the small opposition party PMDC. The MP is also a landowner in the Malen Chiefdom in Pujehun where Socfin Agricultural Company has leased 6,500 hectares for rubber and oil palm.⁶

“They grab land from us and we want to get the land back,” he said. “There is no way we can just sit down for 50 years without getting a living. We need to come together and form a united front. We can’t let them make us slaves on our own land. This evil thing will make the poor people even poorer.”

In his response, the Deputy Director of Agriculture made some startling admissions. He agreed that 50 years was too long for the land leases, but that they did need to be long enough for investors to recover their investments.

“We need to revisit the agreements and see whether they are favourable,” he said. “Because in this situation we need a win-win situation, both parties win, not just one. We need to make space to revisit the agreements.”

This is the first time that a government official has publicly acknowledged that there are problems with large land investment in farmland in Sierra Leone, which the Government of Sierra Leone and President Ernest Bai Koroma have been strongly promoting and praising in the past three years.

Although the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security has personally signed several of the land leases and MOUs with investors on behalf of the government, the Deputy Director of Agriculture maintained that his ministry is just a “broker” between the landowners and foreign investors. He claimed that the competent authority on land is the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA).

SLIEPA, with funding from the World Bank Group, the UK Department for International Development and the European Commission, has been very much behind the land rush in Sierra Leone. It has developed and also advertised on its website the generous fiscal incentives and tax holidays for such investors.

SLIEPA was invited to send a representative to speak at the opening ceremony. Unfortunately it failed to send anyone, so participants were unable to address their concerns to the agency that is leading the drive for large-scale land acquisitions in the country.

Just one of the investors, Swiss-based Addax Bioenergy, sent representatives to the opening ceremony. Other large investors were invited but did not show up, including Quifel Agribusiness (Portugal), SIVA Group/Biopalm (India, registered in Singapore), Socfin (registered in Luxemburg and part of a giant conglomerate partly owned the Bolloré Group from France), Goldtree (registered in Mauritius) and Complant (China).

The Deputy Director of Agriculture repeated a claim made frequently by SLIEPA, the Minister of Agriculture and others promoting the land investment, that only 11 percent of the country's 5.4 million hectares of arable land is "used". This figure has been disputed by Green Scenery, the Oakland Institute and others.⁷

A major study undertaken in 2011 concluded that "there is no remaining potential to significantly enlarge the area under cultivation anywhere in Sierra Leone," and warns that if the large-scale commercial farm investments continue, "a major conflict over land for subsistence food production is pre-programmed".⁸

In his speech to the participants, Herbert M'cleod, a close advisor to President Koroma and Coordinator of this year's landmark Sierra Leone Conference on Development and Transformation, admitted that there were differences of opinion on these figures on land availability. However, the government depends on the figures put forward by the Ministry of Agriculture. But, he added, if policies are to be put in place "to stop land-grabbing", there is a need for a "comprehensive land use policy" looking at optimal rates of exploitation and putting together all available studies on land use and availability.

That the land investment has been happening in the absence of such a land policy and reliable data on actual land use and availability in Sierra Leone, was a startling admission from such a highly placed official.

The most heated debate during the two-day conference occurred near the end of the opening ceremony, when Addax project manager Andrew Turay and Addax social affairs manager Aminata Kamara tried to defend their company's investment.

"Sierra Leone is a country with laws," said Turay. "Even to call this land-grabbing is an insult to the people of Sierra Leone." Before he could continue, the participants drowned out his words with catcalls, in an unusual display of public anger towards such a prominent Sierra Leonean. When Aminata Kamara stood up and began to speak defiantly about how much Addax had done for the people in the lease area, she too earned strong rebukes and there were heated exchanges between her and several women farmers affected by the Addax lease.

Breaking the culture of silence

Over the two days of discussions, participants exchanged information on how land has traditionally been acquired and allocated in Sierra Leone. They also catalogued how, in their views, investors are bending rules, twisting arms, misrepresenting their plans, taking advantage of local customs and working with Paramount Chiefs and government officials to acquire vast tracts of farmland.

"I'm a community land user, I live from farming," said one woman, who lives and farms in the Pujehun District. "But now the investors has come and the Paramount Chief gives all the land away, even the land I use for farming, for collecting firewood, for native herbs [medicines], for everything. Now it's all gone. I have nothing."

Similar complaints about Paramount Chiefs exerting undue influence and excluding their constituents from consultations on the land deals were made about the land leases of Sierra Leone Agriculture (a lease now taken over by the SIVA Group), by Addax Bioenergy, and by Socfin.

During their intense discussions of the actual problems and benefits of such land deals, participants were adamant that if there were any benefits at all, they were primarily for men, some of whom find employment with the investors. But even this generated impassioned discussion. Landowners and users affected by the operations of Addax Bioenergy with its sugarcane plantations and ethanol factory pointed out that they only agreed to the deal because their MP, Martin Bangura of the ruling APC party, and Aminata Kamara, Social Manager for Addax, made so many promises to them about all the benefits Addax would bring - employment, education, schools, clean water, hospitals, farmer training and support.

“The jobs they create are illegal jobs,” said Mohamed Conteh, secretary of the landowners’ association in the community of Yankassa. “They employ for only one or two months for labour and then terminate you. They said that the landowners and land users would be the first to benefit from jobs. They do have some permanent jobs but not for us the landowners.”

“Since Addax came, I don’t have a farm,” said Zainab R. Kamara. “We’re buying English [imported white] rice to survive. Starvation is killing people.”

Mohamed Tulley, head of the Landowners’ Committee of Complant Magbass, a Chinese sugar complex of nearly 3,000 hectares, spoke angrily about the health problems caused by the use of pesticides, the pollution of rivers and contamination of fish. He said that only 155 people are employed full-time; and 1,500 are given only periodic work as labourers.

But once they had voiced their concerns and the conference neared its end, the mood of the participants changed tangibly. Many expressed not desperation but determination to stand up for their rights and to ensure that in future, they will not accept unfavourable land deals with investors.

Participants from a chiefdom where Socfin Agricultural Company is trying to acquire 2,000 more hectares to expand its lease for oil palm and rubber, said that because of what they’d learned from each other, landowners are going to be far more cautious in their dealings with the company. If Socfin wants to lease some of their land, said one landowner, they have to give the landowners 40 percent of what they produce, landowners will decide which portions of it they can use, and they will also demand free education for all the children in the chiefdom from pre-school through university. Otherwise, he said, they will refuse. “All we want is a future for our children. We need to be careful before we decide anything. We don’t want our grandchildren coming to ask us ‘why did you do this?’”

“Before this time, Sierra Leone was having a culture of silence,” said Foday D.M. Sesay of the civil society organization Democracy and Development Association, or DADA-Sierra Leone, which is a member of ALLAT. “I was very much impressed when people could stand up and raise these issues publicly.”

Joseph Rahall also believes the conference was a very successful “first step” in finding common issues among affected communities and engaging policy-makers on the issue of land investment. He said he was surprised, but also pleased, that the delegate from the Ministry of Agriculture recognized publicly that there are problems with the land deals. “It means that they are opening up,” he said. “That means our work is being recognized and our goal is being fulfilled.”

He hopes that the government will now put on hold all land deals until the participants’ demands have been met.

-
- ¹ Oakland Institute. 2011. *Understanding large land investment deals in Africa. Country report: Sierra Leone*. Available at: <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/understanding-land-investment-deals-africa-sierra-leone>
- ² Poindexter Sama. 19 January 2012. Agric Ministry receives \$1.2bn investment for rice and rubber productions. *Awoko* newspaper. <http://www.awoko.org/2012/01/19/agric-ministry-receives-1-2bn-investment-for-rice-and-rubber-productions/> [accessed 6 April 2012]
- ³ Capital Alternatives: Agricultural Land in Sierra Leone. <http://seekingalpha.com/instablog/1980091-capitalalternatives/436571-capital-alternatives-agricultural-land-in-sierra-leone> [accessed 6 April 2012]
- ⁴ United Nations Development Program. 2011. Human Development Report 2011. Sierra Leone HDI values and rank changes in the 2011 Human Development Report. hdrstats.undp.org/images/explanations/SLE.pdf [accessed 6 April 2012]
- ⁵ United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Country Profile: Sierra Leone. <http://www.fao.org/countries/55528/en/sle/> [accessed 6 April 2012]
- ⁶ For more information, see the Oakland Institute Land Deal Brief: *Understanding land investment deals in Africa: Socfin land investment in Sierra Leone*. April 2011. <http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/land-deal-brief-socfin-land-investment-sierra-leone>
- ⁷ For a discussion of land available, see: Green Scenery. Land investment deals in Sierra Leone: Green Scenery Briefings Part I-IV. *Reality check – how much arable land is really “available” for foreign investors in Sierra Leone?* http://www.greenscenery.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15&Itemid=53 [accessed 4 April 2012]
- ⁸ Bald, Joachim and Schröder, Peter. March 2011. *Study on Rural and Agricultural Finance in Sierra Leone: Product Innovation and Financial Access*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ).