

Land grab and impact on local communities in Liberia

RICCE is a development NGO that supports the empowerment of rural communities especially women and girls that are challenged by disasters, conflict, and coercion to improve their livelihood through the promotion of food security, income generation, gender parity, sustainable natural resource governance and healthy environment throughout Liberia.

Liberia has a long history of working with private companies to harness the benefits of its many natural resources, including fertile lands, valuable timber species, and iron ores. As early as 1926, Liberia granted a 99-year lease to Firestone for up to one million acres that is covered rubber plantation. Unfortunately, this approach has yielded no tangible respect, Liberians (land owners) continue to live in abject poverty, pollution and disease.

Liberia placed renewed emphasis on concessions in crafting a strategy to recover from the devastating fourteen-year civil war that ended in 2003.

Rural communities across Liberia depend on land and forest resources from which they generate livelihoods, income, medicines, and undertake other social cultural activities. Right after the 14-year war government began the awarding of concession contracts to monoculture trees plantation and mining companies grabbing community land without their participation in the decision making. This has again denied communities' ownership of land to gather food and income and to engage in traditional agriculture which is major source of employment for rural communities particularly women in Liberia.

Land grab is taking place across Liberia at an unprecedented level however our presentation will focus on two locations Nimba and Cape Mount with new tensions.

The ArcelorMittal mineral company and Solway mineral concessions have been awarded forest land for iron ore mining concession. The mining areas cover nearly all farms and farmland of local communities. Communities continue to suffer both environmental and social impact of the mining as the company expansion grab more farmlands including settlements of communities, sacred sites causing pollution and contamination of water sources. The AML mineral development agreement began in 2005 with initial operation mining operation in Yekepa- form LAMCO sites. As the company explored more mineral it expands beyond and took over new mines most of which were huge settlements and farmland. Smartly, there was no means and bound in the agreement which put the company in a comfortable position to continue to expand wherever they find lucrative. AML has expanded its operation to Tokadeh, Gangri, Yelliton while Local communities remained out of livelihood and exposed to environmental impact (lead, mercury, and Arsenic). A cross-sectional study conducted between July and September 2014, during which water samples (1 bottle from each community) were collected from communities within the concession area and were analyzed for heavy metals at the Nuclear Chemistry and Environmental Research Centre, Ghana Atomic Energy Commission in Accra. It revealed the presence of Arsenic, mercury and Lead (FPA Staff Reporter , 2017).

Community farmland which serves their livelihood including cash crops, tree crop, settlements and sacred sites are all swallowed by mining. Traditional practices, namely animism, membership of Poro and Sande societies and the recognition or worship of sacred features (such as rocks, rivers, and trees) were all disturbed – though the company claim to have made some financial settlement- the social and cultural benefit provided by the practices are priceless- money cannot compensate for the benefits. As the company increase production from 5 million tons per annual in phase 1 to 15 million tons per annual in phase 2 there is strong probability that community settlements including sources of farming, water sources and other will all be covered, and community will be more displaced.

In the same region another concession was awarded in the community forest to Solway mining group covering 152 hectares in Blei and 70. These was a popular citizen criticism and refusal but community leaders out of ignorant opposed and embrace Solway as they feel conservation will not provide the immediate benefits such as perceive jobs creation by concession. Solway Mining Incorporated is a subsidiary of Solway Industries Limited, licensed by the Liberian Government to undertake iron ore exploration.

Photo Credit: ArcelorMittal







In area of these land grab lies the second government Protected Area, the East Nimba Nature Reserve about 13,569 hectares established on October 10, 2003, under strict protection, a no gone zone for community. The area was demarcated with a co-management regime. Farmland including cash crop and tree crop remain in the area with no compensation. Hunting and farming which is the major source of livelihood are prohibited in the area. On many occasions violators were penalized either gun taken, the forest is guided by FDA Rangers -inspecting cooking pots for bush meat. Women was stopped from fishing and collection of NTFP within the Reserve is prohibited.

The demarcation apportioned minimal land space for Farming which is the only income generation means for local communities. Life became very horrible for local communities.

Generally, why community rights have been compromised, the situation of right denial is worse with women, and is cut across all concessions in Liberia though the community right law of 2009 give equal rights to community.

What RICCE and partners have been doing toward solving the problem

In support of community right RICCE have been involved with advocacy for community rights, movement building to tackle the issues, training communities to identity and claim their rights,

strengthening women leadership for forest governance, providing alternative livelihood, and providing bono legal service and other support to survivor of SEA/SGBV

Advocacy for community land Rights – Liberia Community Right Law of 2009 (CRL) give rights to community to own and control their land. RICCE has been actively involved in advocacy at the county level for FPRIC process in awarding concession and at the national level in collaboration with other CSOs- SDI, Rights and Rice, FCI and the NGOs Coalition. We succeeded in supporting the passing of the Land Right Acts of 2018- which further strengthen community ownership

Training communities to claim their rights- we provide trainings to communities’ women, youths, CBOs, and other groups on existing laws- both national and international laws that guarantee community rights. Our trainings have helped communities to understand their rights and are now engaging government to uphold their rights. For example, in Cape Mount Sime Darby concession the community wrote petition to government and called for review of the concession. In Nimba, citizen rejected the renewal of ArcelorMittal concession and demand review of the MDA.



Movement Building – we organize citizen movement to demand the decision makers- legislature, local government authorities for reform. For example, the Nimba Women Movement on SGBV was petition the legislature for reform of laws and policies perpetuating violence against women and girls.

We establish the Women Forum for Environmental Justice in the Zor region where the companies are operation- they have been trained to know their rights- laws and policy and to engage the government to protect community rights- these women group were part of the daughters of Nimba who protested the signing of the AML contract until proper review is done.



In support of alternative livelihood, we are supporting communities to use the little portion of land allocated for farming in a sustainable way so that they can continue to farm to gather food and income. In the affected communities we have introduced conservation agriculture- slash and mulch farming- no shifting- farmer stay one plot of land and gather their food using conservation



We also train farmers to use of low land (swamp land) for rice production(stable food) during rainy season and vegetable in the dry season. This is gradually supporting livelihood and income of local communities. Our extension officers train communities to layout swamps in and provide tools, seeds, and extension services.

In support of income to secure tools and seeds in the long run- we have established Farming as a Business and Village Saving and Loan Association in the affected communities. VSLA provide a simple and accountable system for savings and loans for communities who do not have ready access to formal financial services such as banks or microfinance institutions. VLSA has helped farmers particularly women to increase income and food. Our last project evaluation show reduction in GBV cases as women increase income and contribute to their husband to care for the family. Knowledge is power but money give control to women and girls as they contribute to domestic and community development.



SGBV/ SEA have been on an increase and the survivors are women and girls belong to poor family. When these cases happened, they have no information on the due process; for funds to transport themselves and witnesses to court as well as seek medicine or court processes. We hired lawyers on a pro bono bases to the survivors to hear their cases and support them to seek medication treatment. Many women and girls have benefited these services. Some girls who were pregnant and denied were supported by RICCE Access to Justice project which provided support for safe delivery and gave them same business for survival why the perpetrated has been prosecuted.

Actions

Recommendation

- Transforming the nature of community participation in forest and natural resource governance needs a political process that addresses norms that continue to deny community rights to their traditional entitlement. This may constitute review, reforms and harmonization of laws and policies to close gaps and strengthen community rights and ownership. The Liberia mineral law and the Community Rights Law are in contradiction. For example, concerning the community rejection of the Solway company an Assistant Minister at Land Mines and Energy said: They have their right to their land but when it comes to the issuance of mineral rights in Liberia, we don't consider them," he says. "They

believe that we should ask them before we issue license. We should not.” Movement building is needed to keep engaging decision makers at the higher levels

- Denial of women participation in decision making (politics), ownership and control of land is rooted in entrenched patriarchal system – this is the root of the violence women face. To break this circle, we see women solidarity building as a way forward to engage the holders of traditional norms and law makers to reform policies. But again, we must keep vigorous in building women capacity to understand the abuse because traditional orientation that women belong in the back is still holding some women especially in political process. Women must identify their potential and lead the change they want.
- Access to livelihood and income is key to rescue communities out of power and to give them control. Knowledge is power but if a man cannot feel himself become control by others
- Awareness and education give knowledge and skill to communities to represent their interest- we have seen the impact of this in the way communities are now engaging government and abuser unlike the past. We believe putting more effort into strengthening community/women capacity is way to end abuse of women and girls and to give them voice to speak out.