
Villagers in Sierra Leone Ponder their Future after Winning their Lands Back from a Palm Oil Company

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Villagers in Port Loko District, Sierra Leone are celebrating. **After nearly a decade of struggling against a company that grabbed their lands and erected oil palm plantations, a court has ruled that the lands must be given back to the communities.** Now they are trying to figure out what they should do with the large areas of lands that have been occupied by rows and rows of oil palms.

This saga for the Port Loko villagers began in 2009, when a former British special forces soldier came to Sierra Leone to acquire land for oil palm plantations on behalf of an obscure UK company with no experience in agribusiness. Within three years, Kevin Godlington secured deals covering over 200,000 hectares of lands in the districts of Pujehun, Tonkolili and Port Loko. (1) Soon after, most of these land deals were sold for millions of dollars to other companies who set to work clearing the lands and erecting oil palm plantations. The land deals in Port Loko were sold to the Siva Group-- a company based in Singapore that is owned by an Indian billionaire businessman. (2)

Godlington's deals were made in violation of the most basic international standards of community consent. **In several cases, community leaders thought they were signing receipts for Christmas gifts when they were in fact signing documents giving their lands away.** (3)

Mamanka Village, in Bureh Chiefdom, Port Loko District, is one of the communities that lost their lands through this process. In 2009, Godlington's company, Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd, signed a land deal giving the company 6,557 hectares of their lands, leaving the community without lands for their own food production. The deal was part of a larger deal for 41,582 hectares, involving several other villages in the district. A year later, the Siva Group bought 95% of Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd, with Goldington maintaining a 5% share. (4)

In August 2018, GRAIN, WRM and Bread for All accompanied community leaders from areas affected by oil palm plantations in West and Central Africa on a visit to Mamanka village as part of a workshop (5) organised by the Sierra Leone Network on the Right to Food (SiLNoRF), Women's Action for Human Dignity (WAHD) and other organisations.

We brought with us a copy of the land agreement that had been signed with Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd. (6) To our surprise, this was the first time that the villagers had seen a copy of the agreement. When they looked at it, they quickly realised that it was a fraud. They told us that **none of the local authorities from their community had signed the agreement, and some of the signatures were of people who are not even land owners in the area.** The villagers also said that they had opposed the project when it was presented to them, and that they were severely threatened and intimidated when they tried to peacefully prevent the company from clearing and occupying their

lands.

The villagers also told us how the company had made numerous promises to them, such as the provision of good jobs and schools for the children, and that none of these promises ever materialised. **Only a few of them were hired by the company since it began operations, and it had been nearly a year since the company had paid workers for their wages.** When we visited other nearby villages affected by the same land deal, they told similar stories about how the company had not fulfilled its promises and had increased poverty and food insecurity in the area.

The women of Mamanka Village were, however, very moved by the stories they heard during the Port Loko meetings of leaders from communities in other parts of Sierra Leone and other African countries also affected by oil palm plantation companies. **They realised that they were not alone in their suffering and that actions could be taken to reclaim their lands.**

At the end of the meetings, the women and other participants from Mamanka had arrived at a clear set of demands for the company: the return of their lands; the payment of unpaid salaries and rent; and the annulment of the land lease agreement. All 36 organisations participating in the meeting signed a statement supporting these demands.

According to the woman chief of Mamanka Village, Yarbom Kapri Dumbuya (formerly Mamusu Dumbuya) their fight to get their lands back intensified after these meetings. **"We learnt a lot from experiences shared by other women across the country and within Africa,"** she told Aminata Finda Massaquoi of Culture Radio, during a visit to the village in November 2018.

Their struggle eventually got the attention of a legal rights organisation, NAMATI. Officers of the organisation visited the community and agreed to provide them with legal representation to take the company to court. **After several sessions at the court, the court ruled in favor of the community, ordering Sierra Leone Agriculture Ltd to return all of the lands to the Port Loko villages and to pay them US\$ 250,000 in unpaid rent.** (7)

Speaking through tears, the women of Mamanka Village told Aminata what a relief it was to be able to once again step on their farm lands without being harassed. They thanked all those who have stood by them during their struggle.

Yet many challenges remain for the community. The company left them with a dangerous, half-finished well and about 1,500 hectares of their lands are now occupied by industrial oil palms. The villagers of Mamanka are not sure what they should do about these plantations. Should they try to remove the oil palms and produce other food crops? Should they form a cooperative to produce their own palm oil? Is there some way to integrate the two?

One company that might contact the Port Loko villagers to try and entice them into signing a new deal is the Dutch company Natural Habitats. It runs oil palm plantations in the country, but is also pursuing contract growing schemes with farmers to produce organically certified palm oil. For this reason, the company is sometimes described as being better than the big plantation companies. But the villagers of Port Loko should be wary. Kevin Godlington, the very person that orchestrated the land deal that robbed them of their lands ten years ago, is Natural Habitats' Chief Operations Officer! (8)

The courageous victory of the villagers of Port Loko to get their lands back is an inspiration to communities affected by oil palm plantations from across Africa and the world, some of whom

are also struggling against land grabs by the Siva Group. Now a new struggle begins for the Port Loko communities to ensure that they never lose control over their lands again.

This article is based in part on a report from Aminata Finda Massaquoi from her visit to Mamanka Village in October 2018.

- (1) [The various land deals can be viewed here.](#)
- (2) GRAIN, "[Feeding the one percent.](#)" 7 October 2014
- (3) Caitlin Ryan, "[Large-scale land deals in Sierra Leone at the intersection of gender and lineage](#)", Third World Quarterly, Vol. 39, 2018.
- (4) Interview conducted by Joan Baxter and provided to GRAIN, 2013
- (5) Porto Loko Declaration: [Women say "We Want our Lands Back!"](#)
- (6) [The land deal can be viewed here.](#)
- (7) Cooper Inveen, "[Sierra Leone ruling against palm oil company will empower communities – campaigners](#)," Reuters, 12 November 2018
- (8) <https://www.natural-habitats.com/about/team/>