[Oil palm plantations behind land-grabbing in Sierra Leone]

During 11 years - from 1991 to 2002 - a harsh civil war fueled by the inequitable distribution of power and resources decimated the population of Sierra Leone. The country now faces a state of food insecurity and has become a net food importer attributed not only to the war but also to World Bank and IMF recipes. With the aim of fostering a market-based economy, those institutions imposed policies that curtailed state agricultural programs and investments in agriculture.

Now the government is promoting the “Agriculture for Development” under the model of agribusiness, with larger and more mechanized farms and incentives for large-scale foreign agricultural investment especially in sugarcane and oil palm plantations for agrofuel. Several measures facilitate foreign investors' access to land such as a 10-year tax exemption on investments in tree crops.

The result is a land- grabbing process in Sierra Leone where farmland previously cultivated for food is being made conveniently available to big business, often in long-term leases to produce non-food products for export. The country report on Sierra Leone produced by The Oakland Institute (1) reveals that “about 500,000 ha have already been leased or contracted out to large-scale agricultural investors, mostly foreign” on the grounds that only 12 to 15 percent of the country's arable land is being “used” or “cultivated” - implying that the rest is available for investors.

However, as the report explains, 60 % of the arable land of Sierra Leone is occupied by the bush fallow farming system of smallholder farmers, where fields are cultivated for a few years until soil fertility is deleted, and then are left to fallow for 10 to 15 years. During that period bush fallows perform important functions including replenishment of soil nutrients that promote the re-growth of many plant and tree species thus conserving biodiversity, carbon sequestration, protection of watersheds and water resources. Bush fallows also provide firewood, wood for construction and tools, fodder for livestock, medicinal plants, bush yams, bush meat, wild fruits, all of them vital elements for the communities.

The great environmental, social and economic value of the bush fallow system is being dismantled by policies that allow big foreign companies to rush into Sierra Leone to try to make windfall profits. The Oakland Institute reports that Quifel Agribusiness (SL) Ltd. (subsidiary of Quifel Natural Resources, Portugal) has acquired 126,000 ha of primarily lowland farmland or bush fallow in the Port Loko District, in the eastern region of the country. The company focus is renewable energy and agribusiness, and it has a biodiesel plant in Brazil.

Three different land leases were signed in the Masimera Chiefdom, the Koya Chiefdom, and the LokoMassama Chiefdom, all of them for 49 years, with possible renewal for 20 years, at USD 5 per ha, rising each year up to USD 8 per ha. According to the Oakland Institute's report the three chiefdoms where Quifel lease areas are located are inhabited by smallholder farmers who cultivate rice in the lowland rice growing areas called bolilands as well as non-industrial oilpalm, cassava, sweet potatoes, pineapple, cocoyams, beans, maize, many different vegetables, mango, banana, plantain, papaya, coconut, orange, lemon and grapefruit. They produce food for subsistence as well as surplus to sell. When the smallholders farmers of the community of Petifu in LokoMassama Chiefdom saw their bush fallows being felled to clear the Quifel plot they staged a protest saying they had given up their fertile land on false pretenses.

Local “agents” engaged as“coordinators” are usually hired to negotiate leases with local communities, chiefs and landowners who are led to believe that they would obtain only benefits from the deals. Agreements lack transparency, potential affected people have not been consulted and possible risks such as loss of farmland or negative environmental impacts are not even considered while no Environmental Social and Health Impact Assessment (ESHIA) has been conducted to quantify environmental impacts.

Quifel's promises of employment and other alleged “development” opportunities were the main reasons that landowners and chiefs say they agreed to the leases. However, there are no reported statements or documents indicating how many jobs will be created or whether those jobs can compensate for lost income and decreased food supplies. So far, employment opportunities have been extremely limited.

The company Sierra Leone Agriculture (CAPARO Renewable Agriculture Developments Ltd.) - focused on oil palm plantations for agrofuels, edible oil and soap -is another agro-investor in Sierra Leone studied by The Oakland Institute, with a lease on 43,000-46,000 ha for a projected oil palm plantation.

According to data provided by the company to the The Oakland Institute, the lease in Sierra Leone is for 45 years with possible renewal every 21 years, and it is for 43,000 ha where oil palm plantations would be established to produce palm oil for the local market. The project would involve mills and processing plants, allegedly creating 3,000 to 5,000 jobs. The Oakland Institute says this information has never been made public in the country.

Regarding women, the report identifies that they are “extremely vulnerable in the face of land negotiations. While women represent an extremely important part of the farming population and are vital contributors to food security, women have no legal title to land (although there are some exceptions). Because they are not landowners, women are generally not present at consultations with investors and, even if they are, they have no voice. In many cases, they are not even aware that the land they are cultivating is being leased. Not surprisingly, therefore, women are not entitled to a share of land rental fees, even when they lose their land.”

At present there is a push for a rapid land tenure reform in Sierra Leone. The land reform process which is funded by the World Bank appears to be driven by a desire to facilitate large-scale agricultural investment. The Oakland Institute says that “There are concerns that the land tenure reform, by favoring investors, will overlook the rights of local peoples, particularly women. For example, civil society groups fear that foreign investment will displace women farmers who currently have no title to land and thus are not eligible for compensation from land leases.”

Oil palm has been a traditional crop for many African communities but now it has become a menace in the hands of greedy corporations driven by the international demand for palm oil and agrofuels. However, awareness is rising. The NGO Green Scenery in Sierra Leone has denounced that small farmers who are losing their livelihoods to plantation owners are petitioning the government for renegotiation of the 40-year lease agreement of 16,000 acres of prime farmland with Socfin Agriculture Company Sierra Leone Ltd (Socfin SL), a subsidiary of the Belgian corporation, Socfin. The farmers argue that they had not been properly consulted and they were cheated with information on the lease agreement. They claim that “compensation for plantation and annual land rent completely ridicules the value for loss of land and livelihood incomes of land owning families” (2). The claim has been faced with imprisonment and pending court trials.

You can join the protest action started by Rainforest Rescue at https://www.rainforest-rescue.org/mailalert/814?mt=1264 to stop SOCFIN plantation project and return the land to the farmers.

Article based on: (1) “Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa. Country Report: Sierra Leone”, The Oakland Institute, 2011,http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/understanding-land-investment-deals-africa-sierra-leone ; (2)http://www.greenscenery.org/index.php/component/content/article/32).