Liberia: Action against the expansion of oil palm plantations by Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum

The three leading Liberian civil society organizations Sustainable Development Institute (SDI), Save My Future Foundation (SAMFU), and Social Entrepreneurs for Sustainable Development (SESDev) released a statement on January 31, 2013, calling for a review of Liberia's agricultural policy. Since 2006, the Government of Liberia has entered into binding contracts – known as concession agreements – with three major oil palm producing foreign investors: Sime Darby (Malaysia), Golden Veroleum (Indonesia), and Equatorial Palm Oil (UK). These concessions cover massive tracts of Liberian land; in total, they span nearly two million acres – just under 10 percent of the country's total land mass. Thousands of Liberians who had farmed and lived off the land growing rice, cassava, and a variety of food crops to feed themselves and to sell the surpluses, cultivated cash crops such as rubber and kola nuts for sale and collected a variety of non-timber forest products from nearby forests for domestic use and sale to markets have experienced the loss of these industries that had provided diverse opportunities for income generation to men and women alike. The Malaysian palm oil company Sime Darby was granted a concession in Garwula District, Grand Cape Mount County. When it started its operations in the region, farmlands were cleared and converted to oil palm plantations. Also the forests from which local people harvested non-timber forest products were cleared and converted to oil palm plantation as well and even the community's culturally significant sites were desecrated. Communities inside the concession areas were not properly consulted prior to the signing of the contracts, and the farmers were not told the prices the company would pay for their crops in advance. Some of them initially rejected the payments, but the company threatened to hand their compensations to the government, so they accepted them for fear that if the payments went to the government it would be impossible to get them back. Eventually the compensation paid for crops that were destroyed was inadequate. There is no more land available to residents: they are now confined to their villages and there is nowhere to farm, which may contribute to increasing poverty and crime rates in the area, and forced migration; they have to buy their food items, including their staple foods, cassava and rice, from other villages that are far away and from the capital city, Monrovia. Without land to farm, they are unsure how else they are going to survive in the coming years. (1) Two complaints have been filed against Sime Darby Plantation Liberia and Golden Veroleum Liberia by community representatives to the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). The Liberian government admitted to "mistakes" and most recently, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf agreed in London to "revisit" the agreements with a critical eye. The need for a thorough, transparent review of the current situation led the coalition of Liberian NGOs that calls for a review of Liberia's agricultural policy to start a campaign urging oil palm companies to respect human rights, renegotiate their contracts, and protect the livelihoods of the rural poor. "Giving away land for large scale plantations is hailed as promoting the economic recovery of Liberia, but in reality these plantations undermine Liberia's basic food security and cause poverty when livelihoods are lost. Therefore, allowing them contradicts the Liberian government's own policies on reducing poverty and preventing hunger," stressed Silas Kpanan'Ayoung Siakor, campaigner with the Sustainable Development Institute. "Allocating large swathes of fertile agricultural land to foreign companies for several decades will push people further into poverty, as local income generating activities are curtailed and peoples' earning capacities become limited", he added. The civil society organisations are also concerned about large scale conversion of primary and secondary forest to palm oil

plantations as Sime Darby expands into Gbarpolu county. They are demanding a halt to any further planting and further deforestation and environmental degradation in any of the concession areas. “Forests have environmental benefits and provide multiple livelihood sources for the people, which they have now lost. Employment from the plantations is insecure; low- paid and does not contribute to sustaining livelihoods in the long term. Instead, local communities want the Liberian government and the palm oil companies to recognise their ownership of community land”, says SAMFU campaigner Robert Nyahn. Sime Darby claims that it upholds international human rights standards and voluntary guidelines such as the UN Global Compact of which the company is a signatory. However, an analysis of the contracts between the Liberian Government and the Asian companies demonstrates they are likely to be violating several Human Rights conventions ratified by Liberia. (2) Liberia’s Land Commission has recommended a draft land policy that includes recognition of community land ownership. However, communities located inside existing agricultural concessions – including those of Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum – would not be included in the reform. This oversight ensures that tens of thousands of Liberians will technically remain squatters on their own land. The statement released by SDI, SAMFU, and SESDev urges the government, Sime Darby, and Golden Veroleum to protect the rights of rural farmers by agreeing to bring their concession agreements in line with international human rights principles, and to recognize legal community ownership over land. (1) All this has been exposed in the report “Uncertain Futures,” authored by Silas Kpanan’Ayoung Siakor, and published by the Sustainable Development Institute in August 2012. The full report is available at http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/21_set/2012/Liberia.html (2) Report by the Forest Peoples Programme “A human rights-based analysis of the agricultural concession agreements between Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum and the Government of Liberia”, available at http://www.foei.org/simedarby Article based on: Press release “Liberian civil society urges oil palm companies to respect human rights, renegotiate their contracts, and protect the livelihoods of the rural poor”, issued by SDI, SAMFU, SESDev on January 31, 2013; “Land grabs and human rights violations exposed in Liberia ahead of global development summit”, Friends of the Earth International, January 31, 2013; “Civil Society Coalition Statement on Oil Palm Concessions in Liberia” by Save My Future Foundation (SAMFU)/Friends of the Earth Liberia and Sustainable Development Institute (SDI).