
Liberia: Plantation expansion and the plunder of a continent

“Liberians are healthier, better fed, have more income, consume more, are more literate and enjoy the greatest amount of freedom ever” (1), says the Liberian government. The government also claimed that more Liberians are getting richer and the gap between rich and poor people in Liberia is reducing. But, according to UNDP (2) 84 percent of the population lives in Multidimensional Poverty or faces deprivations in health, education and their overall standard of living. In 2012, Liberia ranked 174th out of a total of 186 countries listed on the Human Development Index. More than two thirds of Liberians are amongst the poorest people in world, and widespread public perception is that the level of inequality between the rich and the poor continues to rise.

The UNDP statistics beg the question: why is Liberia, like many African countries, so rich in natural resources, and yet the majority of the people are poor? The factors responsible are numerous, but bad governance and plunder of a country’s resources by elites and corrupt politicians are key factors. According to the International Land Coalition, “bad decisions over land can equally expand and entrench poverty, inequality, and disempowerment” (3).

Using the land example, changes in policy and practice could contribute to reversing the situation in many parts of Africa. Instead of African governments taking land from the poor and handing it to multinational corporations, they could be supporting communities to put their land to productive and profitable uses. One way could be to encourage investment in food production through low tech but efficient technology.

Liberia, for example, “depends on imports for 60 percent of its food, of which the national staple, rice, constitutes 65 percent” (4), and “81 percent of the population is either highly vulnerable or moderately vulnerable to food insecurity” (5). To address this situation, two of the three broad objectives of the government’s agricultural policy are to make “safe and nutritious foods available in sufficient quantity and quality at all times to satisfy the nutrition needs of all Liberian” (6) and to ensure “inclusive and pro-poor growth in agricultural production, productivity, competitiveness, value addition and diversification, and linkages to market” (7).

Investing in food production clearly has the potential to economically empower citizens, reduce poverty, enhance food sovereignty, and stimulates economic growth that leads to more equitable and inclusive development. The government has instead granted more than 50 percent of the country’s land area for rubber and oil palm plantation, logging and mining activities. The rhetoric of adopting a pro-poor approach to stimulating growth in the agricultural sector seems to make a mockery of poor farmers who are being stripped of their farmlands that are then handed over to foreign investors.

Experiences across Africa show that the current concession model does not only dispossess people of their land and disrupts their livelihoods, it creates conditions that reinforce poverty, inequality and injustices. These conditions intensify grievances against the state and its corporate collaborators –

fertile conditions for violence and conflict. This export-dependent model is also vulnerable to price fluctuations, such that low commodity prices often leave natural resource dependent countries with dangerous budget deficits.

It goes without saying that, when African governments take actions that do not make economic sense, package them in political rhetoric, and justify them as measures aimed at creating jobs, reducing poverty and promoting development, they set themselves against their citizens' interests. When they fail in their responsibilities to negotiate business deals that ensure the maximum possible development benefits for their people, they betray the public trust. Their failures give rise to, and justify citizens' demands for accountable and responsible leadership.

September 21, 2013 farmers, social movements and NGOs across Africa will renew their calls on governments to implement sound development programs aimed at promoting more inclusive and equitable development. These will not be new demands, but there is now a sense of urgency that did not exist before. Unfortunately, while citizens across the continent are demanding to have a say during contract negotiations and to receive their fair share of benefits from their resources governments are responding aggressively.

In Uganda, a new law has imposed wide ranging restrictions on public gatherings, a tool used by activists challenging land grabbing. In Gabon, a Goldman Environmental Prize laureate has been harassed and intimidated, reportedly for his stance against large-scale land allocations to plantation developers. In Liberia, two senior government officials have publicly attacked the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) and branded the organization anti-development, for challenging human rights abuses linked to oil palm plantation expansion. When asked to justify his attempt to shut down a citizens' meeting on palm oil in western Liberia, the Superintendent countered that NGOs were not talking about how plantation development would benefit the people.

"Taking away farmers' lands, destroying forests, and surrounding entire villages with oil palm plantation do not fit in with our vision for development in Liberia" says Nora Bowier, who leads SDI's work on oil palm plantation expansion. To her, when her government allocate land that customary communities depend on without their consent and just compensation, it contravenes its duty to protect citizens against human rights abuses. On the other hand, when oil palm and other plantation companies such as Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum as in the case of Liberia, fail to avoid infringing on the rights of communities, they cannot shift the blame to the government – their responsibility is separate from that of the state.

As many of these plantations on the continent expand, activists warn, land conflicts will become commonplace. "It is just a matter of time, before things start falling apart for the state, their corporate collaborators and communities; no one is likely to emerge victorious in this situation" Nora concludes.

NOTE: A shorter version of this article has been submitted to D+C Magazine <http://www.dandc.eu/> (Germany).

Endnotes

(1) Socioeconomic Achievements of the Government of Liberia, 2006 – 2011, p. 9, Government of Liberia. Available

from: http://s3.amazonaws.com/zanran_storage/www.mopea.gov.lr/ContentPages/2529148229.pdf

(2) Human Development Report, 2013, UNDP: Available from:

(3) Land Rights and the Rush for Land: Findings of the Global Commercial Pressures on Land Research Project, 2012, p.9, International Land Coalition.

(4) Everyone Must Eat? Liberia, Food Security and Palm Oil, 2013, p.5, Columbia School of International and Public Affairs.

(5) Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy: from subsistence to sufficiency, undated, p.1, Government of Liberia.

(6) Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy: from subsistence to sufficiency, undated, p.xii, Government of Liberia.

(7) Food and Agriculture Policy and Strategy: from subsistence to sufficiency, undated, p.xii, Government of Liberia.

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