
Forests under siege: Liberia may intensify forest destruction

“The world’s forests remain under threat from illegal logging... Illegal logging perpetuates corruption, undermines livelihoods, fuels social conflict, deprives governments of revenue and erodes countries’ natural resource bases.” Chatham House Report, July 2015 (1)

Forestry officials in Liberia have tabled a proposal that will allow for large-scale conversion of forests to oil palm plantations. This is despite the fact that Liberia is still struggling to deal with the problem of illegal logging, even though the European Union (EU), the Government of Norway, the United States, and other donors are investing more than US\$200 million dollars to fight illegal logging and forest destruction in the country.

In July 2015, the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) circulated the draft of a “Manual for Harvesting Trees in Agriculture Plantation Extension and Mining Contract Areas” to stakeholders for review. According to the manual, for a company to log an agriculture concession, it must confirm that the area does not include a proposed conservation or protected area, demonstrate that the agriculture concession holder has plans to clear and plant oil palm in the area for which the timber needs to be removed, has a map of the area, and possesses a letter of waiver or consent from the holder of the agriculture concession; the agriculture concession holder is however allowed to extract timber for use in their operations. With agriculture concession areas including vast expanses of forests in the northwest and southeast of the country, forest destruction will ultimately intensify if the government forges ahead with this plan.

Liberia’s forest provides livelihoods for more than half of its 3.5 million people. According to the 2008 census, more than two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas where almost everyone relies on forest resources such as timber and non-timber forest products including herbs, rattans, bush meat and a variety of food items for subsistence and income generation. Yet, successive governments have colluded with illegal loggers to plunder the country’s forests. For example, between 1997 and 2001, approximately 2.5 million cubic meters of timber was logged, of which more than 1.7 million cubic meters were exported, mainly to Europe and Asia (2). A government-led review of logging concessions in 2005 found that all the logging companies that operated during that period did so illegally (3).

Similarly, between 2009 and 2013, the current government illegally allocated more than 3 million of the estimated 4 million hectares of the country’s forest. More than 2 million hectares issued under “Private Use Permits” were later cancelled. Seven large concessions covering more than one million hectares continue to operate – even though a government commissioned post-award audit from 2013 found that 771,390 hectares had been illegally allocated to four logging companies. The remaining three concessions were not assessed during the audit but they had also been allocated in the same manner. The future of these concessions remains uncertain as Liberia and the EU grapple with how to deal with them under the Voluntary Partnership Agreement that is aiming to stem the flow of illegal timber from Liberia into the EU.

Conversion timber as an emerging problem

According to a report from the think-tank Chatham House, globally, more forest is being cleared for agriculture and other land uses, and as much as half of the tropical timber now sold internationally comes from forest conversion in tropical countries. The report also found that while illegal logging has declined since 2000, the gain has been offset by increased illegal production of timber from forest conversion.

Already, Liberia's legal framework allows for certain forest areas to be logged and converted to plantations and other land uses, under permits known as Timber Sale Contracts (TSCs). However, there are safeguards to prevent wanton destruction of forests. For example, TSCs can only be awarded on forest fragments no larger than 5,000 hectares, and disconnected from any significant forest area. Additionally, they can only be allocated on Public Land, through a concession plan approved by the Cabinet, and awarded through competitive bidding. Furthermore, TSCs cannot be issued for land already under another land-use contract. The current legal framework therefore excludes logging in existing agriculture concessions and is meant to keep the possibility of forest conversion to a minimum.

Following the logging requirements laid out in the manual, industrial logging in agriculture concessions will open several possibilities that would be damaging for Liberia's forest. First, it will immediately open the door for forest clearance and conversion in at least 500,000 hectares of forest. Second, it will put pressure on oil palm companies that have been reluctant to allow logging in their concessions. Third, it will destroy other forest resources, such as rattan, round-poles and other local construction materials, as well as the native palms harvested and processed for edible oil across Liberia, and bush meat. Communities depend on these forest areas and forest resources for subsistence and income generation, and priceless environmental functions. Therefore, opening the gate to industrial logging in "agriculture concessions" would not only be an environmental disaster but would also have severe social and economic consequences.

What, then, needs to happen?

The ultimate responsibility for managing the country's forests in a responsible manner rests with the government and people of Liberia. As such, the government should withdraw the manual and revise it to limit timber extraction from "agriculture concessions" and to salvaging timber exclusively for use in the region where the concession is situated. The revised version should explicitly exclude industrial logging. The EU and the Government of Norway should take steps not only to distance themselves from this plan, they should raise concerns about the plan with the government of Liberia; not to do so would imply complicity. Civil society on the other hand, should mobilize and launch an aggressive campaign locally and internationally to save the forest and protect the livelihoods of communities that depend on them.

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1. Chatham House Report 'Tackling Illegal Logging and the Related Trade: What Progress and Where next? July 2015. Available from: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/tackling-illegal-logging-and-related-trade-what-progress-and-where-next>
2. Plunder: the silent destruction of Liberia's rainforest, 2002.
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http://www.forestsmonitor.org/uploads/2e90368e95c9fb4f82d3d562fea6ed8d/plunder_1_.pdf

3. Forest Concession Review Report, May 2005