
Liberia: A Proposal From Liberian Civil Society to Reform the Forest Sector

Since 1990, logging companies, rebel groups, criminal networks, various interim governments and the regime of former president Charles Taylor have colluded to plunder Liberia's natural resources. During this period the timber sector witnessed a plethora of illegal activities and practices. Logging companies operated in rebel held territories without any form of regulation from the Forestry Development Authority; none of the revenue generated during this period benefited the Liberian people. Following the election of former President Charles Taylor, he began rewarding former allies, financiers and associates with logging concessions without going through the due process as established by Liberian laws. It has been established that most of the logging companies that operated during this period did not have their concession agreements ratified by the Liberian legislature. Additionally, various United Nations Panels of Experts established that revenue from the sector was being used to provide military support for armed groups within and outside of Liberia and other illegitimate purposes to the exclusion of the vast majority of Liberians.

In 2003 the United Nations imposed sanctions on the importation of Liberian timber for various reasons including the use of timber revenue to provide military support for armed groups within and outside of Liberia, thus destabilizing the country and extending the armed conflict to neighboring countries of the West African sub-region; the lack of an audit regime to curb the high incidence of extra-budgetary expenditures, political corruption and diversion of sector revenues towards illegitimate purposes by the Taylor Government, and the lack of good governance, transparency, and the acceptance of the rule of law in the sector. The timber ban came into effect on July 7, 2003.

The United Nations Security Council, however, in November 2003 mandated the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) to reform the timber industry before sanctions are lifted.

To facilitate civil society participation and contribution to the process, the Sustainable Development Institute, under the auspices of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) Coalition for Liberia, on April 8, 2004 organized a civil society planning workshop aimed at developing a civil society proposal, detailing key issues that the reform process must address and develop recommendations as to how the identified issues could be addressed.

The proposal was drafted at the civil society planning workshop organized under the theme "Increasing Transparency and Promoting Public Participation to Enhance Forest Law Enforcement and Governance". The draft was published for two consecutive days in one of Liberia's leading dailies inviting public comments and input. Following a review of comments and suggestions, the proposal was finalized by the civil society Forest Sector Reform Working Group on April 21, 2004.

The proposal, which highlights the issues of transparency and accountability, public participation and equity in the sharing of risks and benefits from the sector stressed that increasing transparency and accountability, promoting public participation and equity in the sharing of risks and benefits should form the basis of all actions to address the problems of the forestry sector.

The problems identified by participants as affecting forest law enforcement and governance in Liberia included the lack of transparency and accountability, limited public access to information about the chain of operation of concessionaires and the overall management of the sector by the Liberian Forestry Development Authority (FDA). Participants at the civil society planning workshop lamented the centralization of forest management structures to the exclusion of civil society especially forest dependent communities, which has led to inadequate public participation in decision making about and management of forest resources. They said this has been ensured by the lack of provisions within the FDA regulations or the standard concession agreements to provide for independent monitoring of the chain of operation of the forestry sector by Liberian civil society, especially local non-governmental organizations and forest dependent communities in order to support national forest law enforcement and governance efforts.

Political interference and conflict of interests, lack of capacity or inadequate capacity within the FDA and civil society for forest law enforcement and governance were also identified as key problems facing the sector. Looking back, participants deplored the granting of logging concessions and other forest exploitation rights to companies and individuals during the conflict period, which gave rise to uncontrolled and illegal logging and the militarization of the timber sector from 1990 to the present.

To address these situations the proposal called on the National Transitional Government of Liberia to adopt the recommendations as measurable objectives for the reform process and take immediate steps to implement them. The recommendations included immediately auditing the sector and putting into place mechanisms to prevent the diversion of sector revenue towards illegal ends and amending the existing concession agreement to provide for independent monitoring of forestry and logging operations, especially by local NGOs and forest dwellers, in order to support and enhance national forest law enforcement and governance efforts, granting the public access to information relating to the entire chain of operations of the timber industry, and making available all concession agreements, including maps and management plans, annual coupe, etc. within the public domain. The civil society proposal also called for incorporating new provisions in the concession agreement that would require logging companies to publicly declare all monies paid to the government including taxes, fees or fines. This provision would also require concessionaires to make information about their production, processing, export, etc. directly available to the public. This would help to reduce the high level of corruption in the sector.

Excerpted and adapted from: "Increasing Transparency and Promoting Public Participation To Enhance Forest Law Enforcement and Governance", developed at the Civil Society Planning Workshop and Finalized by the Forest Sector Reform Working Group, sent by Silas Kpanan'Ayoung Siakor, Director, Sustainable Development Institute, e-mail: director@sdiliberia.org (alternative email: sdi_liberia@yahoo.com)