
[Liberia: Concerns over World Bank's promotion of rubber plantations](#)

The US\$ 3.5 million loan that the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group is about to award to the Liberian Agricultural Company (LAC) to develop a rubber plantation of 120,000 hectares in the Grand Bassa county is provoking growing concern in Liberia (see WRM Bulletin 29). The project is aimed at restarting operations and initiating a rehabilitation program of the plantation, which had been abandoned because of the civil war that affected the country between 1989 and 1997.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), that will be performed by an IFC team which has recently arrived to the country is not a guarantee that social and environmental consequences of the project -as well as LAC's negative background in the area- will be taken into account. On the contrary, Liberian environmentalists consider that the decision has already been taken, and that the EIA will become just a formality to appease their claims.

Concerns are based not only on the false promises that LAC has formulated in relation to the development of the area, but also on the project itself. In fact, LAC has on previous occasions failed to live up to expectations of fair wages for its workers, education for their children, and health and decent housing. After three decades of LAC's presence in the area, schools in the company's estate could operate only thanks to the assistance provided by Catholic Church members, while workers still dwell in over-crowded concentration camp style housing units that are presently almost in ruins. In the meantime, the company's business has thrived.

Several dark points of the project are also worrying. For example, there is no mention that part of the area to be planted is occupied by forests, from which the company will extract timber. The substitution of forests by rubber monocultures in such a big area will certainly generate negative environmental impacts. In spite of this, the project ignores that logging will be a major component of the initiative and this is considered to be a manoeuvre by LAC to avoid a full-scale EIA.

Additionally, the fate of traditional communities situated in the concession area has never been properly addressed. LAC has said that "there is no settlement within the areas identified for new rubber plantations... but there are small numbers of shifting cultivators". This seems to imply that, being few and "shifting" they don't constitute settlements and therefore can be ignored. LAC's promise that there will be no resettlement or displacement of local communities because of economic reasons is not credible. As stated recently by a local environmentalist: "Encircling communities with rubber trees so to leave them with no land for farming and the means to meet their other needs for survival, for us, amounts to one command: move or perish!"

The World Bank is currently performing a review of the implementation of its 1991 Forestry Policy (see WRM bulletin 31). This is a good opportunity to carry out a review of these types of projects -that the Bank continues to support- and to see if they are really in line with the Bank's mandate of poverty alleviation and sustainable development, or if they are at odds with social justice and environmental sustainability.

