Women, Land, Plantations and Oppression in Sierra Leone

Oil palm plantation company Socfin has meant violence, patriarchy and oppression for affected communities in Sierra Leone. Yet, women have to confront another patriarchic system closer to home. Paramount Chiefs are the custodian of the land according to customary law, which often give men decision-making and ownership power over land.

The long standing land-grabbing processes in Sierra Leone is a result of a colonial and imperial violent past. Arable and collective land previously cultivated for food is being made conveniently available to big business, often in long-term leases to produce export products such as palm oil.

The oil palm has been a traditional crop for many communities in Sierra Leone and across West Africa. Nonetheless, with the arrival of multinational oil palm company Socfin, its production in Sierra Leone has turned into one of industrial monoculture with a trace of violence, patriarchy and oppression.

In 2011, Socfin entered into a 50-year land lease agreement with the Sierra Leonean government and local authorities, which was followed by two more agreements. The company paid landowners of the Sahn Malen Chiefdom a once-off compensation of 1 million Leones per acre (around 177 dollars). In less than 10 years, the forests and fertile land of this Chiefdom were transformed into thousands of hectares of oil palm monocultures.

Women are extremely important contributors to food sovereignty in the rural areas in Sierra Leone. However, they have usually no legal title to land. Even if statutory laws might allow women to be landowners, women have to confront another patriarchic system closer to their homes.

Customary laws often give men most decision-making and ownership power over land issues. On top of that, Paramount Chiefs are the custodian of the land according to customary law in Sierra Leone. Chiefs are the uncontested leaders within the boundaries of their territories. They are descendants of the “ruling families” designated by the British colonial rulers in 1879. This hierarchical structure means that the company can acquire community land with the consent of just one person.

Women are the most affected ones.

This is an interview with Aminata Massaquoi, a member of the Informal Alliance Against Industrial Oil Palm Plantations in West and Central Africa. Aminata is accompanying and supporting women in Sierra Leone who are opposing and denouncing the oil palm plantations model, and has recently visited several communities affected by Socfin’s plantations.

How is the land tenure system organized at the governmental level in Sierra Leona, particularly in relation to women rights?

Land in Sierra Leone is classified as state, private or communal land. In the western part of the country most lands are held under individual private ownership with exclusivity rights to use it and

transfer it. Families or individuals have rights of access, use and transfer by lease or sell. And, as you know, there are also the customary land tenure systems, tenancy and state ownership operating in the country, as well as in other parts of the world.

For women in rural areas or women living in communities is not so easy because of the customary laws that are in place there. Civil society and women's rights groups over the years have been advocating for all land laws in the country to be synchronized to avoid dual interpretation on the same subject matter but that is yet to be achieved.

Meanwhile, large-scale land acquisitions, primarily by foreign companies for agricultural development, have increased rapidly, precisely at the same time as debates around land policy have taken place. A research by the NGO Christian Aid reported that from 2009 to the end of 2012, foreign investors had taken out or set to take out long leases on at least 1,154,777 hectares, about 21.4% of the country's total arable land for large scale industrial agriculture (1). As has been the case elsewhere in Africa, such large acquisitions have been criticized by numerous experts and NGOs claiming that rather than helping to improve the living standards of those who live in rural areas, such leases exploits land titles and actually increase poverty and economic inequalities. This is still a great concern and the signs are evident in areas where such leases were undertaken.

What is the situation of women at the community level in relation to land tenure and land access rights regarding customary laws?

In Sierra Leone, customary law sits alongside statutory law, but in rural areas, where there is little access to statutory justice services, customary law tends to prevail. People rely on village chiefs to resolve disputes. And when it comes to marriage, customary marriages tend to dominate though they are not recognized by the statutory law. Unless a customary marriage is registered with the local councils, it does not confer any property rights on the husband or wife. So if one's spouse dies, the couple's land may revert to the deceased spouse's family.

For women, who are often the main workers, breadwinners, and caregivers in households, and who depends the most on their land to make a living and support their children, this means that if the man dies or if a woman wants to dissolve a marriage due to domestic violence, she may have no rights over the land she has worked on for years. In that case, she could be removed from the land by her husband's family. Her children likewise have no rights to the said land and that can be difficult to confront because these women are not financially strong to fight back. In Sierra Leone, the 2007 Devolution of State Act gave women the legal right to inherit land, but in reality only few women inherit land.

Because of numerous advocacy activities around women's land rights, it is made to believe that women are included in decision-making, but in practice it is not the case. Several women explain to me during field visits that they would only know when the land deal has already been done because the customary law is used to silence them. Women have always denounced the complete lack of possibilities for them to participate in the discussions when companies, governments or others come to the communities to offer projects or buying the land

Furthermore, statutory laws give women rights to own or lease land, however, customary laws denies them that right. Because vast of the lands are in the rural areas, the majority of the women are

suppressed by local authorities. Nonetheless, the continuous advocacy work at the communities level has been helping out a lot.

There is also a prevalent violence towards women from within communities and from communities' Authorities. This has been a concern from place to place and because of customary laws and traditions, in most rural communities, women are expected to take the back seat during public engagements. Especially if a woman is married, she must not dare to talk or take decisions in the presence of her husband. The husbands or men become the spokespersons for the women. In consequence, an empowered woman or women that are aware of their rights in that light, become exposed to violence from within their homes for insubordination. Many schemes can be put in place to silence women.

During your visits to several communities confronting industrial palm oil plantations, what did you perceive is the most relevant grievance that women raised?

The common complaint has been the lack of inclusion in land deals and decision making. With the palm oil plantations came they became deprived to access their lands and need an alternative source of income. They are struggling to regain their lands back because the deals are not profitable to them. Local people are not employed by the company as promised; schools, water wells, health centers, scholarships, feeder roads, and many other promises were not delivered. Women also complain that their communities are not safe anymore as they were before the arrival of the company.

It was also clearly stated that sexual abuse do happen within the confines of the plantations but because of stigma and rejection by the men, it is normally not discussed.

Which types of abuse are women subjected to?

For women working with the palm oil companies, it is hard work for a low pay. They walk long distances to work. There is no proper medical attention; there are dismissals without benefits; they don't have labour rights (they keep them as "casual workers" without contract, and can be sacked at anytime); they have no health insurance or coverage for accidents on duty.

Women shared experiences related to sexual advances made by some workers or security guards on those working for the company, and these women are expected to cooperate or else they would lose their jobs. Some women unwillingly go into such experiences for keeping their work and wages.

For those women who are against what is happening, they are being marginalized from being part of the community activities. They are always targeted by local authorities and their movements are sometimes monitored.

How are women confronting this situation?

They do so mainly by boycotting the community meetings that are connected with the companies. They act in disobedience towards the Paramount chief and strengthen relations with allies as well as local and international organizations that engage with them from time to time on the subject matter. Also through workshops on laws and rights. They meet internally from time to time though they are being monitored.

(1) Christian Aid, Who is benefiting?, 2013