

Green Scenery

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The Country's Natural Resources Are Nature's Gift To Us What We Make Of Them Are Our Gift To Posterity

Freetown, 24 April 2013

Press Release

For Immediate Release

Is our country part of the “wild west”? A moratorium on large-scale land leases for agriculture is urgently needed in Sierra Leone.

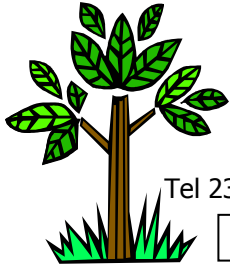
In November 2012 the head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) warned that large-scale land deals are undermining food security. He compared "land grabs" in Africa to the "wild west", saying a "sheriff" is needed to restore the rule of law. And just recently, World Bank President Dr. Tim Yong Ki echoed concerns about the risks associated with large-scale land deals, noting that, "Securing access to land is critical for millions of poor people. Modern, efficient, and transparent policies on land rights are vital to reducing poverty and promoting growth, agriculture production, better nutrition, and sustainable development."

Green Scenery is concerned about large-scale land leases taken out for agriculture in Sierra Leone in general and particularly in Pujehun district since 2010. Based on figures from registered land leases, Green Scenery calculates that 60% of the total area in Pujehun district is already being, or could soon be converted for large-scale industrial agriculture, primarily for oil palm plantations. According to the registered documents, seven of twelve chiefdoms have leased large portions of land to investors for 50 years with possible extensions of up to 100 years. Lease areas range from 6,575 hectares to 47,568 hectares. Annual rents per hectare vary from 1,000 Leones (USD 0.23) to USD 12 (with 50% of that for landowners), leaving local farming communities with very little to live off after losing their land and economic trees.

Green Scenery is uneasy by an emerging trend. At least in two of seven land deals, the companies that first acquired the land are alleged to have sold it to multinational groups, thereby transferring the land leases to these transnational companies. It has been revealed that the sum of USD 1.5 million was paid for the takeover of one company with a lease of nearly 40,000 hectares and with an annual lease rent of USD 2 per hectare. The Paramount Chief in the affected chiefdom maintain that they were neither hardly informed about these transactions or the meaning of the new ownership or "new management", nor were their consent requested. Signatures on four of the initial registered lease agreements suggest that the same small group of people is behind several different companies involved in the land deals in Pujehun District. It appears as if the main intention behind the land acquisitions is speculation for high rates of return from the transfers rather than to create new opportunities for farmers and local communities to improve their lives, or even for revenue to the state.

This kind of large-scale land acquisition will radically change land-use and ownership in Pujehun District, concentrating control of more than 75% of the arable land in the district in the hands of a few corporations. Just one company, Biopalm Energy Limited, registered in Singapore and part of the Indian SIVA Group,

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controls nearly 98,500 hectares, close to one quarter (23.9%) of the entire Pujehun District. The company also holds a large lease in Port Loko and an option for a lease in Bo district. The question of how access to land, and how land rights can be secured for present and future generations is urgent and must be answered by the Government of Sierra Leone.

Findings from recent field visits in four chiefdoms (Makpele, Kpaka, Gallines Peri and Panga Kabonde) in Pujehun District for which land leases have been signed indicated that in most cases consultations must have been very poor. Very few stakeholders were involved at the initial stage. Youth and women seemed to be excluded from decision-making. Chiefdom authorities, including Paramount Chiefs, were not fully aware of the registered documents or their details, such as the size, the survey map, the length of the lease, payment procedures. None of the four chiefdoms engaged a lawyer before signing any agreement. Equally worrisome is that they seemed unaware that these leases were binding documents. Bringing in the question of the whole issue of due diligence.

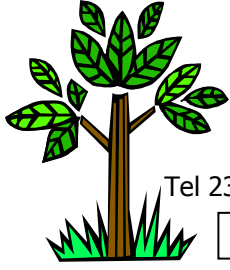
The understanding of the chiefdom authorities is they agreed only to accept the investor entering their chiefdom. They insisted that according to customary procedures, it is then up to the landowners how much land they are willing to give, if any at all. Since the investors didn't seek those agreements with landowners yet, the "surveyed" areas on the documents didn't mean much to them. Some even said that there was no survey undertaken or they never saw the survey map attached to the registered agreements. The District Officer in Pujehun who made two visits to affected chiefdoms (Makpele and Sorogbema) expressed his doubts that the Chiefs were fully aware what they were signing. He and the Deputy District Chairman expressed concerns that if the trend continues in Pujehun district it is a recipe for conflict same concerns were shared by several other district authorities.

Even where the Sierra Leone Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA) was involved in introducing the company to the Paramount Chiefs, no further guidance was provided. No one that spoke with Green Scenery was aware of any official monitoring by government agencies of investors' approaches to ensure compliance with best practices or SLIEPA guidelines for investors, published by the agency in 2010.

Of major concern to Green Scenery is the impact of such investments on food security. According to a 2011 study commissioned by the Bank of Sierra Leone and German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) in Sierra Leone there is "no idle productive land that could easily be made available for commercial investment under the current patterns of smallholder upland cultivation and fallow rotation". The large area of land under lease in Pujehun District is mainly for industrial oil palm plantations, meaning a dramatic reduction in farmland availability for crucial food crops, including grains, tubers, vegetables and legumes. This will inevitably affect food security, a trend that is already evident in the operation area of Socfin Agricultural Company (S.L) Ltd, a subsidiary of the Socfin Group, registered in Luxemburg.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) announced recently that the growing production rates of major food crops such as rice, cassava, sweet potato, groundnut and palm oil since 2007 are mainly based on the success of the heavily donor-funded smallholder commercialisation programme.

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How large-scale industrial plantations will affect or jeopardize such positive trends must be answered by the Ministry, which also facilitates foreign direct investment in agriculture.

Green Scenery calls on international partners of Sierra Leone to recognize findings from civil society organizations and grievances of affected chiefdoms and communities. The policy to attract foreign private investment in agriculture for large-scale monoculture must be re-examined and its flaws recognised. The Government should place and enforce a moratorium on large-scale investment in agriculture before it is too late. The signed leases have to be reviewed and communities must be properly informed and provided with safeguards.

“We cannot agree more with the statement of the FAO representative that land deals in poor countries like Sierra Leone must be brought under control,” says Joseph Rahall, director of Green Scenery. “It needs not only one ‘sheriff’, but many to stop companies from taking advantage of our lack of regulations and mainly illiterate farmers and customary procedures“.

“The government is obliged to protect its citizens,” adds Rahall. “We ask for prompt action. Land is at the heart of a sovereign state. It bears on people whose land rights must be respected and secured”

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More information: Check the Green Scenery fact sheet on Pujehun district on www.greenscenery.org/publications