



Questions we need to ask about what would be the second largest rubber plantation in Africa

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By Sonkita Conteh, Director, Namati

In early August this year, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited Sierra Leone on a tour of the three “most Ebola affected” nations. A release from the President’s office stated that Mr. Wang Yi wanted to understand among others, the socio-economic needs and challenges of the country post Ebola and to discuss ways of advancing work on specific projects crucial for Sierra Leone’s socio-economic development. China has been a staunch supporter during the Ebola crisis which has killed nearly 4,000 people in the country. (Photo: Sonkita Conteh, author)



Visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (L) speaks while Sierra Leone's Foreign Minister Samura Kamara looks on during a press conference in Freetown Aug. 8, 2015. (Photo: Xinhua/Lin Xiaowei)

The Foreign Minister assured the Sierra Leone government of China’s continued support to the country in the post Ebola phase, especially in the areas of health, infrastructure, industry and human development. He also confirmed the continuation of two specific projects; - the new airport bankrolled by China is still alive and the biggest agricultural investment in Sierra Leone will proceed as planned.

While the airport project still raises some concerns in terms of compliance with environmental regulations and plans for relocation of inhabitants, more serious questions remain unanswered about the farming project, which will occupy land that is nearly four times the size of the capital, Freetown.

In 2012 the government of Sierra Leone and China’s Hainan Natural Rubber Industry Group announced a \$ 1.2 billion rubber and rice investment in Sierra Leone. The 50 year deal will utilise 135,000 hectares of land across 12 chiefdoms in Tonkolili, Moyamba and Port Loko districts. This equates roughly to over 333,000 acres- the unit of measurement of land in Sierra Leone. The deal is likely to catapult Sierra Leone into a leading position in the rubber production index for Africa, knocking Firestone in Liberia off of the grid. With 100,000 hectares of land for rubber, yearly output is estimated at 180,000 tons, second only to Cote d’Ivoire.

The project estimates the creation of over 30,000 full time and 150,000 part time employment with projected revenue to government assessed at between \$ 50-100 million. The government of Sierra Leone itself will own a share of the investment in exchange for the land.

Confirmation that the project “is a go” will be sweet music in the ears of a government keen to boost foreign direct investment. Last month it launched a post-Ebola recovery strategy, which emphasized private sector investment as a priority.

As the government celebrates this “vote of investor confidence” and stronger ties with the People’s Republic, several critical questions about the project remain unanswered: Did government properly assess the impact of a humongous rubber plantation on lives, livelihoods and the environment before signing up? Rubber is notorious for depleting water sources, and pollution resulting from processing latex could be devastating to humans and the environment. Were any lessons learnt from the over 80-year operations of Firestone Rubber Company in neighbouring Liberia? The American-owned company has been accused of many ills including severe environmental pollution, abysmal working conditions, child labour and breach of corporate social investment in housing and education. Did the government consider alternatives to this crop or even the model of a large scale plantation? In the past 12 months we have seen so-called big businesses in agriculture and mining buckling under pressure. Maybe it is time to focus on developing small and medium enterprises which are known to have a higher capacity for adaptability. Finally, did land-owning families agree to lease their land before government committed land to the rubber planter- land that government did not own? Are the land-owning families and communities simply going to be presented with a fait accompli? A key

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challenge of many large scale land investments has been the absence of adequate consultation and consent seeking, especially where government was involved as a player. The Socfin investment in the south of the country is a clear example. The government obtained land from chiefdom authorities without complying with the tenets of “free, prior, informed consent”. It later transferred the land to the company with a whole host of unresolved issues.

A lot more transparency and public deliberation is necessary in this “historic deal”. To start, the terms of the deal with the Hainan Group should be made public. Further, meaningful consultations and consent-seeking should immediately commence at chiefdom and even village level in line with the Guidelines for Sustainable Agricultural and Bioenergy Investment 2013.

Pursuing foreign direct investments as a development strategy makes sense, especially now to counterbalance the effects of the Ebola crisis. However it is important to evaluate opportunities with a critical and balanced perspective, questioning every angle of a deal before making commitments. Those likely to be affected should not be left out in the cold.

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