

SIERRA LEONE: Land deals beginning to stir discontent



Photo: [Felicity Thompson/IRIN](#)

Socfin oil palm plantation

FREETOWN, 20 March 2012 (IRIN) - In southeastern Sierra Leone's Pujehun District, the small village of Kortumahun sits at the edge of orderly rows of hundreds of thousands of bright green palm oil seedlings. Small groups of women weed the pots while men spray fertilizers and pesticides across the nursery.

It has been 30 years since large-scale oil palm plantations operated in this chiefdom. But in March 2011, the agro-industrial company Socfin Agriculture Company Ltd., a subsidiary of the Belgian company Bolloré, signed a 50-year land lease with the government of Sierra Leone to produce palm oil on 6,500 hectares of land in Pujehun's Malen chiefdom.

Tommy Silman, landowner and resident of Kortumahun, says he wishes he had not given up his land: One month ago he leased all 3.04 hectares (ha) of his land for the next 50 years to the government. He used to cultivate oil palm trees for direct sale to process into the cooking oil used by most Sierra Leoneans. "It was not a fair deal," Silman says, explaining that he received no receipt for the land sold and now has no idea of where he stands.

Flocking in

Foreign land investment is on the rise in Sierra Leone and, as with many of its neighbours, the government wants more companies to come in to boost the economy and spur much-needed agricultural development in rural areas. Sierra Leone ranked 180 out of 187 countries on the [UN human development index](#) in 2011.

The country's Investment and Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA) advertises "over 4.3 million ha of cultivatable land available", high local demand for staple food crops and opportunities for the production of biofuels for the global market.

According to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Lands, around 70 percent of arable land is available for investment, outside of protected forest reserves. "Foreign land investments are a good thing," says William Farmer, director of surveys and lands in the Ministry of Lands. "Civil society makes a lot of noise about land-grabbing. But if the investment is well-planned then it can create employment and improve lives."

The US-based policy think-tank the Oakland Institute's 2011 country [report on Sierra Leone](#) counts 15 large-scale land deals totalling 500,000 ha. This was published before the largest-yet recorded deal in 2012 with the Chinese Hainan Natural Rubber Industry Group which signed a US\$1.2 billion deal with the government in February to lease 135,000 ha for rubber and rice plantations.

The Hainan group has promised to plant 35,000 ha of rice for sale on the local market, establish a rubber-processing factory and create approximately 100,000 jobs. Rubber plantations will stretch over 100,000 ha, across three districts - Moyamba, Tonkolili, and Port Loko.

But as more and more companies flock to the country to lease large tracts of land, murmurs of protest and unrest are cropping up among local populations who are unhappy with the way the deals are done; and civil society groups are growing increasingly concerned that foreign land deals are not producing the win-win scenarios they had hoped for.

Lack of regulation, transparency

The problems arising are the same as in many other developing countries: the power imbalance between negotiating parties and the lack of regulation means local communities can lose a lot through land deals, says Joseph Rahall, director of Green Scenery, an NGO working on environment and human security issues in Sierra Leone.

"There are so many ways companies are coming into the country... When communities are so weak [compared to big companies] that they don't have lawyers, they cannot afford lawyers and government is not providing them, this is problematic."

Kortumahun village chief Bockarie Juana says he was not involved in negotiations on the land lease with the company. He told IRIN he received money for his land, but was given no documentation such as a copy of the land lease or a receipt for the amount paid.

"One of the difficulties is that the Paramount Chief [district chief] came to us and asked us for our land on lease. But they have now uprooted everything [all the trees] and this is what we were using to look after our responsibilities [live off]," he told IRIN.

Sahid Abu-Dingie, who works on land reform at the UN Development Programme (UNDP), told IRIN: "The whole process is not clear. If it were transparent, then nobody would grumble. But if people are not getting the right information this will definitely lead to chaos and that is what we are starting to see in Pujehun."

More on land deals

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There are currently no laws regulating large land deals in Sierra Leone. The Ministry of Agriculture has produced guidelines suggesting a land lease payment of \$5 per acre per year (\$12.36 per hectare per year) to landowners who agree to give up their land for a lease period of up to 50 years, with an option to renew for another 21 years. But Rahall says the amount is far too small.

"Even where companies pay the full amount, the government is taxing the people 50 percent," he says. "Half of the company's payment goes to the District Council, the traditional leader and to the central government."

Abu-Dingie agrees: "It is not possible for [former landowners] to survive on the amount of money they are given per acre," he says. "Even the nuclear family will find it hard, let alone the whole extended family who have rights to the land."

Several landowners in Pujehun told IRIN that before these deals they had been managing to support their families through the revenues they earned by cultivating palm oil. Tommy Silman, for instance, calculated he earned on average \$861 annually from the three harvests produced on his 3.04 ha.

It is the landless farmers who get the worst end of the deal, Abu-Dingie adds, as they lose the land they farm and do not get any compensation.

Land tenure reform must take place before large land deals can benefit local communities, says UNDP. A draft land reform policy is currently under review by parliament which UNDP hopes will lead to laws to regulate the practice.

Back at the nursery

In October 2011 residents of Malen blocked Socfin's operations in protest over low labour costs (\$2.30 per day) and the amount paid for compensation and surface rent.

Socfin's general manager, Gerben Haringsma, says some local community members are being difficult. He told IRIN he wanted "do something good for the people and combine it with the interests of our company". The process for investing in land in Sierra Leone is very unclear, he said.

According to Haringsma, Socfin has purchased an ambulance for the community, built 22 water wells, is renovating schools, and constructing two bridges and feeder roads. Haringsma says the company also has \$75,000 a year for community development, but is waiting for the formation of a chieftdom committee to decide how to use the funds.

Such funds need to be independently monitored to make sure they benefit whole communities and not just a few individuals, say NGOs.

In the meantime, in Malen community spirits are low as 15 Malen residents who were charged with "riotous conduct" for their protests over wages await their court hearings.

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