

My Development Diary

Insights into Field Realities

TAG ARCHIVES: LAND GRAB

Land Grabbing for Agriculture is Causing Conflict in Southern, Sierra Leone

Posted on **March 14, 2014**

Something I have been hearing about since the day I arrived in Sierra Leone is about the conflict or 'uneasy calm' that has arisen from land grabbing for large-scale agriculture by foreign companies. 'Land grabbing' simply defined is [when governments, banks or private investors buy up huge plots of land to make profits](#). In the particular case of Sierra Leone an [estimated fifth](#) of the country's arable land has been leased since 2009 to industrial farming, many of them foreign companies producing biofuels from crops, such as oil palm and sugar cane.



— On the way to the communities

Where I am working there is one particular land grab contract for arguably the largest oil palm plantation in Africa under the company Socfin Agricultural Company Ltd. The local farmers I have been working with in this Chiefdom have explained that this plantation is directly causing uneasiness/conflict, threatening their physical and nutritional security. This [report](#) published in 2013 provides evidence towards this 'uneasy calm' as a result of the land grab. I had the opportunity to witness this uneasy calm first hand, as I am working alongside three farming based organizations based within two of the communities within the effected Chiefdom.

Socfin Agricultural Company Ltd (SAC)

SOC is part of Belgian Socfin Group. It is leasing 6,500 ha and seeking to lease and plant an additional 5,500 ha with expansion to 30,000 ha in the Malen Chiefdom, Pujehun District, Southern Province. This has been sub-leased from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Services for the next 50 years at a rate of US\$12.50 per hectare per year for the purpose of oil palm (crude palm oil) and eventually rubber.

There is an estimated 9,000 people effected across 24 communities.

According to SAC its promise to give back to the communities includes three roadwork projects and has built eight water wells, one ambulance, a primary school, some footwear and jerseys for a friendly football match, a generator and paint for the police station outside SAC's operational area. To date, SAC has no intention of investing in agricultural programmes, nor has it looked at how local people who have lost their livelihood can be compensated.



- The palm oil plantation referred to extends for as far as the eye can see

Advertisements

REPORT THIS AD

Response from smallholder farmers

Farming based organizations (FBOs) I work with have expressed their ambition to build large scale farms to generate profit. No smallholder I have spoken to wishes to remain small scale, but their vision of large scale is something entirely different from a plantation. Many have expressed a desire to cultivate large areas with a range of diverse crops that service different purposes, such as for community/home consumption or for exports. Almost every farming based organization I work alongside is producing food crops for consumption and sale (rice, cassava, vegetables), despite the Ministry's push for non-consumable commodities (palm oil).

With the situation in Sahn-Malen, people are extremely dissatisfied with the company SAC. SAC's plantation has resulted in "loss of farm income and produce from the bush and tree-crop

areas, the impact on food and nutritional security, new social ills and discord in the communities, and the limited and short-term employment opportunities available with SAC.” There is also dissatisfaction with the wages provided by SAC to those labourers who work on their plantation. Wages of Le 10,000 [about US\$2.30] per day cannot compensate them for their lost farm income and produce. Moreover, due to the loss of local food production, the cost of food has risen with the staple, fish for example rising to between 15,000-20,000SL per unit from LE1,000-2000 prior to SAC’s plantation. The qualities of the meals have also deteriorated with cassava and sweet potato meals now missing meat and fish, vegetables (okra, garden eggs), beans and wild fruits resulting in lower nutrition.

Worst of all, the promises made by traditional leaders, politicians, company representatives and respected local people to agree to SAC’s investment have not been met and people are now angry and afraid. Expressions about the land include ‘It is for our children’ and they prefer the ‘freedom’ they enjoy as an autonomous independent farming community not to work under a company as a labourer.



— I am meeting with farmers effected by the land grab situation

Land is the social glue

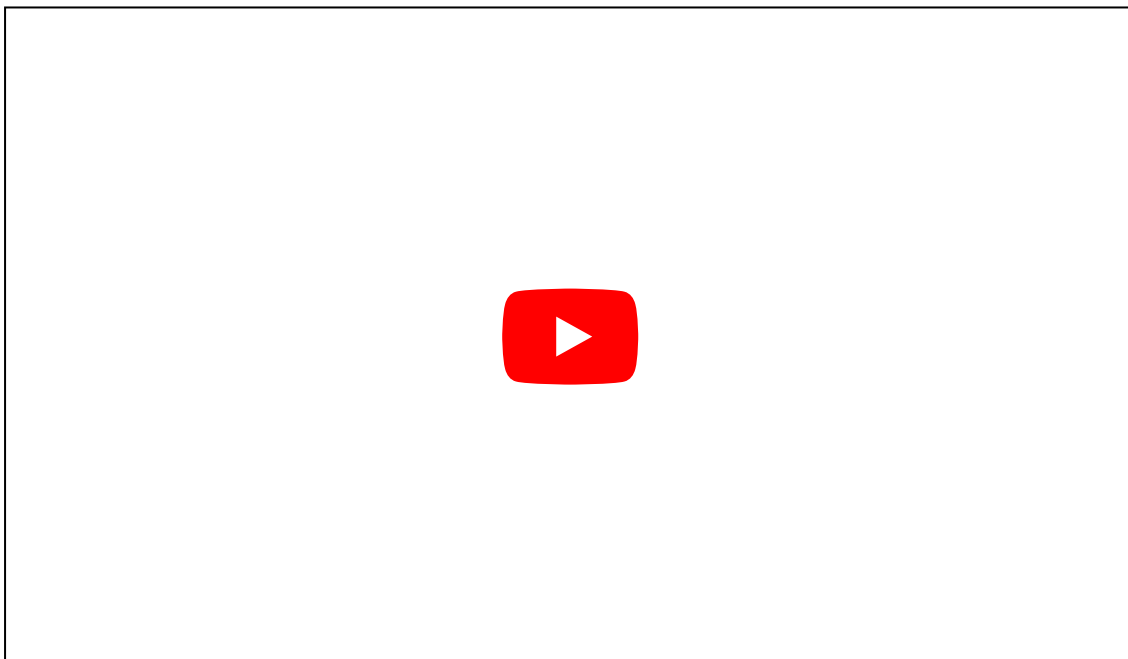
As the above report rightly claims, land is a kind of social glue. FBOs and their respective communities have developed social groups that work together on communal pieces of land and share the harvests and profits from their sale. Land is the source of rural livelihoods and in Sierra Leone the farming systems and land use patterns are extremely complex, with different land types used for different purposes. Farmers have in the area have asked for my advice on what to do with their business because due to this land grab, there is a shortage of land with the greatest perceived loss being the upland farms, where people cultivate upland rice, as well as fruit and medicinal trees.

Now that people's land have been taken away for palm oil, the sources of livelihoods have changed. The most important sources of income, such as sale of farm produce, value added farm products and farm labour have been either greatly reduced or gone altogether, which makes the work we are doing much more challenging. This lack of income is resulting in higher rates of poverty —the intended opposite effect of business or/ agriculture development. People often express to me that they are having more trouble paying school fees for their children.

It is also impacting the social context with an influx of 'strangers' that have moved to their communities to find work – so the assumption that the company is hiring local people is (might) also be false. There is also expressed concern about the potential risk of water contamination from chemical fertilizers and herbicides being used on the plantation.

The above report mentions that SAC's plantation has resulted in less sharing and trust within the community, increased poverty which is resulting in conflict, teenage pregnancy (as families cannot afford their daughters), increased borrowing and debt, theft, sex work and divorce. There have been multiple murders over the past month, making the place unstable. Staff I work with can no longer travel alone, making service provision that much more difficult to provide and coordinate. After 4pm, people fear any vehicle on the road, and I have witnessed women jumping into the forest as we drove by. To be clear, this is not a security threat to me, as I do not live in the area, but a big challenge to our work, to people's livelihoods and the well-being of those living in these communities.

Agricultural sector development is meant to improve the wellbeing of its communities. It is supposed to provide strong livelihoods, competitive markets, food and nutrition and all of the other benefits that come with development NOT instability, fear, mistrust, poverty, and violence.



Sources

Christian Aid (2013). 'Who is Benefitting?' Found at: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/who-is-benefitting-Sierra-Leone-report.pdf>

Grain. (2014) Sierra Leone farmers reject land grab for oil palm plantation. Found at:
<http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4849-sierra-leone-farmers-reject-land-grab-for-oil-palm-plantation>

Posted in **Insights From the Field** | Tagged **conflict, farm, food, food security, land grab, nutrition, plantation, sierra leone, west africa** | [Leave a reply](#)