

## Liberia: Two Communities sign Logging Contracts, but Sector Woes Loom

By **James Harding Giahvue** Last updated **Dec 23, 2019**

*A portion of Korninga-A Community Forest in Bopolu District, Gbarpolu County/James Giahvue*

**KORNINGA, GBARPOLU/GOLA KONNEH, GRAND CAPE MOUNT** – There are huge expectations throughout Korninga after this remote chiefdom in Gbarpolu’s Bopolu District signed a logging contract with Coveiyalah Investment Enterprises. Like in all of the contracts other forest communities in Liberia have signed, the company agreed to develop the community in lots of ways.

“Within the next five years, I am hoping to see the community prospering when it comes to roads, sanitation, education and healthcare,” says Armah Johnson, a member of the governance structure of Korninga “A” that manages the 48,296-hectares forestland. The Forestry Development Authority (FDA) assigned “A” to the community to distinguish it from Korninga “B”, its neighbor.

More than 60 miles from Korninga in Grand Cape Mount County towards the Sierra Leone border, Gola Konneh has also signed a contract with another logging company called Akiwa Group of Companies for its 49,179-hectare forest. Similarly, the company has agreed to pave Gola Konneh's roads, build a school and erect a clinic.

"When investors come in your community, it means more help for us," says Varney Seh, a member of the community's forest governance structure.

*David S. Wiazamuah, an elder of Gola Konneh in Grand Cape Mount County/James Giahvue*

"We need some benefits from them," adds Miatta Kandakai another member of the governance structure. "You will not just come in our forest and carry the benefits without us having any benefits."

Korninga and Gola Konneh are the newest of the 40 forest communities in Liberia, according to the community forestry department of the FDA. In addition to agreeing to develop the communities, Akiwa and Coveiyalah must pay them land rental and cubic meter fees in accordance with the law.

It is a decade now since the Community Rights Law of 2009 with Respect to Forest Lands (CRL) was created, yet the experience for many communities has been spiteful than sparkling. Logging companies defaulting on payment they agreed to make, communities themselves entangled in deep divisions, government officials exploiting loopholes the law to exert influence among locals, and the FDA itself has been criticized for mismanaging and contributing to these crises.

"There are lots of success stories but on the other hand there are some really sad stories that you can't hide," concedes Atty. Gertrude Nyaley, technical manager of the FDA's community forestry department. "It is glaring that non-performance is an issue in the logging or forestry sector," "It is glaring, people are agitating everyday," she says.

"Before you sign third party (logging contract), you need substantive proofs, technical and financial capabilities. Sometimes when you advise them ... it is up to the community to accept or reject," Nyaley adds. A contract between logging company and a community becomes a law even if the FDA doesn't sign, according to the CRL.

*Two villagers in Korninga stand on top of a pile of rotten logs left here following the outbreak of the private use permit (PUP) scandal/James Giahvue*

The leaderships of both Korninga and Gola Konneh say they are aware of the situation in some forest communities and are taking steps to avoid similar errors. Both communities have had bad experiences with loggers long before the CRL.

“We visited their site, we saw their sawmill in Grand Bassa and we saw their operational site, and we got encouraged and we think that they are [professional] in the activities of logging,” says James K. Momo, a leader on Gola Konneh’s community forestry management body. The CFMB negotiates contracts for the community under the supervision of the executive committee of the community assembly, the forest governance structure’s highest decision-makers. Apart from the field visit, Momo says he and other community leaders reviewed Akiwa’s credentials and consulted the FDA before signing the deal.

But Akiwa has had some problems with one of the communities in which it has operated. It owes two year of land rental fees to Beyan Poye Community Forest in Gibi district, Margibi County it signed an agreement with in 2017, according to Jehudi Barnyou, the community’s Chief Officer. Barnyou says the company has committed to settle its arrears in March 2020. Akiwa has been logging in Liberia since 2008, operating previously in Grand Bassa. Akiwa did not immediately respond to queries for comments.

Johnson of Korninga claims they did background checks on Coveiyalah. With hundreds of rotting logs in the forest here, this Kpelle chiefdom still grapples with the aftermaths of the private use permit (PUP) scandal of 2012. Moses Wogbeh, the former Managing Director of the FDA, was prosecuted for his alleged involvement in the biggest scandal to hit the forestry sector. He was, however, acquitted but not reinstated. Korninga is the first forest that Conveyialah, which was established earlier this year, is operating. It has already build headquarters in Gainkpa.

“After the community forestry [law was passed] ... we embraced [it] because the disaster that was carried on during PUP time was very, very frustrating,” says Johnson. “The logs they cut got damaged, citizens did not benefit.”

Despite the due diligence Johnson and Momo speak of, there are signs that they could be heading for trouble, campaigners say.

For instance, the National Union of Community Forest Management Body (NUCFMB) spotted a number of flaws in the Gola Konneh-Akiwa agreement at the community's elections and contract signing ceremony in October this year. The NUCFMB intervened and had the timeframe changed for payment of cubic meter fees from one year to quarterly in line with regulation 105-07 Section 33 of the New Forestry Reform Law of 2006. The union also spotted that there wasn't any timeframe allotted to the projects the company promises to undertake.

"We found out that people only listen to hear how much a company is paying, how many people the company will employ," says Saye Thompson, president of the NUCFMB in an interview with this reporter. "But people don't look at the legal terminology used. Most people will only see the [logging] agreement at the signing date." It was NUCFMB's second time to witness the signing of a logging contract. The first was with Korninga.

There are similar problems with the Korninga-Coveiyalah logging contract, according Jonathan W. Yiah of the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI). "There are some unattainable clauses in the agreement," says Yiah in reference to a clause in the agreement requiring the company to build a wood science college in the community.

SDI is working with the NUCFMB and the FDA with funding provided by the government of Norway through the Liberia Forest Sector Project to undertake capacity building activities for members of the Union in order to strengthen performance of their roles and responsibilities as community forest managers.

*Miatta Pratt, a member of Gola Konneh's community assembly displays agenda of community forest meetings she has attended/James Giahvue*

A good contract is not just enough, says Yiah. It would also take a strong coordination among layers of communities' governance structure to avoid the problems other communities face.

"There needs to be a regular interaction," Yiah urges, adding community assembly members—required by the law to meet at least twice a year—should meet more frequently during the community's forest management plan development processes and if they wish to undertake commercial logging. "They need to be holding some emergency meetings ...

when they are undertaking development of their management plan or advancing towards third-party agreement,” he tells this reporter, urging them to manage their forests in line with their forest management plans.

Regular meetings don't seem to be an issue with both Korninga and Gola Konneh, though. Members of the communities' leadership say they take meeting very seriously. Annie Sumo, one female community assembly member in Korninga, says she has been to nearly all of the assembly's meetings, even before they applied for forest community status. Miatta Pratt, who occupies the same position in Gola Konneh, brags of that same profile. She displays agenda of most of the meetings she has attended on a table.

However, Johnson agrees with Yiah, and says maintaining such interest from townspeople will be key to the success of the two communities. Korninga has 14 assembly members and Gola Konneh 62, one of the largest community assemblies in the country. “It was more difficult for everyone to attend meetings during the rainy season due to the distance people have to travel,” says Johnson. “That is one of the reasons why we want the company to come and open some of these roads.”

Momo, on the other hand, blames “personal interest and corruption” for the problem in the community forestry sector. He says most communities' governance structure run into trouble because certain individuals pose as owners of the forest, not managers.

The woes of the community forestry sector could change euphoria here into melancholy in the future. Nevertheless, the townspeople's hopes remain high. They revel in an opportunity to manage their forest and benefit from its resources.

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