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Sierra Leone, human rights and sustainable agriculture

Land Grabbing in Sierra Leone

Globally, as the impacts of climate change worsen, populations grow, and the demand for food increases, so does the demand for cheap land to exploit for natural resources. The appetite for cheap land often comes at the cost of local communities and the local environment. Sierra Leone, one of the poorest countries in the world, ranks 182 out of 189 on the United Nation Poverty Index and has 60% of the population living below the poverty line (United Nations Development Program). Land grabbing is a human rights violation that occurs when large tracts of land are ceded for use by a company without proper community and land owner consent. Land grabbing is a growing phenomenon in Sierra Leone, harming local communities' livelihoods and their chance at a sustainable food-secure future where their human rights are protected.

Located in West Africa along the Atlantic Ocean and bordering the countries of Liberia and Guinea (World Atlas 2018), Sierra Leone is home to 7.977 million people. The country's tropical terrain includes forests, woodlands, savannas, and croplands (USGS). Due to its climate and landscape, Sierra Leone is able to grow a multitude of plants such as rice, a staple crop that 85% of farmers grow (Feed the Future 2017), along with cassava, groundnut, millet, oranges, bananas, cocoa, and palm oil (USGS and Peace Corps). It has vast geological resources such as diamonds, bauxite, rutile, and gold.

For millennia, Sierra Leone's economy has been primarily based on subsistence agriculture with the average farm size being .5 - 2 hectares and the prevalent system of farming following traditional bush fallow agricultural methods (Feed the Future, 2017). Bush fallow agriculture in Sierra Leone is the practice of clearing small plots of land to farm annual crops for 2-3 years and then leaving the land to rest for several years to allow natural vegetation to help restore the nutrients to the soil (welthungerhilfe). During this time the land is used for different purposes, as a report by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe explains, "If a field is no longer used for annual crops, other useful plants like bananas are cultivated and can be harvested in the transition to the fallow phase. Fallow land also provides building materials, firewood, and medicinal plants. It is also a hunting ground for bushmeat, which contributes a considerable portion of protein to the local diet". Letting the land lie fallow for 20-25 yrs is important in ensuring sustainable agriculture by allowing soil regeneration and ecosystem health. Fallow lands also contribute to the local communities' livelihoods by providing other natural resources such as firewood and game.

Despite the important role that fallow land plays in sustainable agriculture and community livelihoods, a poor understanding of its role in the rotational bush-fallow agricultural system means that fallow land has been mislabeled as being unused land available for cultivation. This falsehood continues to be spread by international organizations such as the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (UNFAO). Reports that take the agricultural system into account acknowledge that all 5.4 million hectares of arable land are being used for agriculture. However, encouraged by international organizations as a way to help development and increase GDP, the Sierra Leonean government promotes false claims of available land to foreign companies through the Sierra Leone Investment & Export Promotion Agency (SLIEPA). The misunderstanding of how land tenure is practiced in Sierra Leone has led to land grabbing. Usually, when this happens, a large tract of land may be provided to an agribusiness without the people farming the land giving their proper consent. An example of this can be seen in the Malen Chiefdom where 6,660 hectares were leased to Socfin Agricultural Company (SAC) for 50yrs with the cost of rent being \$12.5 per hectare

per year of which landowners would only receive 50% (Food First Information and Action Network - FIAN). SOCFIN worked with the paramount chief rather than the farmers whose families owned the land to arrange the land deal. When information about the lease was communicated to the people of the chiefdom, they were misinformed about the amount of land that would be leased and the benefits that would come from the deal. When it came to the signing of the final land lease agreement only 5 of the nine sections in Malen affected signed the document. Even those who did sign were not properly informed of the contract's contents since it was written in English and not their native tongue. Additionally, evidence of coercion and bribes was uncovered in an investigation of the situation. Since the land deal went through, food security has decreased, women's vulnerability has increased, and economic livelihood has been put into question (Welthungerhilfe et al). This pattern of coercion exhibited in the Malen Chiefdom has been replicated in other land grabbing cases across the country (and world). These practices displace the farmers with little or no compensation.

Land grabbing is being justified under the guise of helping solve world hunger, decreasing poverty, addressing environmental degradation, and helping the economy (TNI Agrarian Justice Program). However, what research from Christian Aid, Green Scenery, Welthungerhilfe, and others indicates is just how devastating the impact of land grabbing is for local communities. When land is taken from communities and converted into plantations, food security decreases in the surrounding communities along with water quality due to fertilizer runoff. Environmental degradation, habitat loss, and social unrest are additional impacts. These impacts are devastating, especially given the vulnerability of Sierra Leone across a variety of metrics. Roughly 5.1 million Sierra Leoneans are "lacking sufficient nutritious food to live a healthy life" with "789,536 of them being severely food insecure" (World Food Program). Sierra Leone's resistance to the effects of climate change is also harmed as the local ecosystems are degraded and biodiversity decreases. This may prove devastating given that Sierra Leone is ranked the fourth most vulnerable country to the effects of climate change, and it is "categorized as extremely vulnerable in terms of impact on food production, poverty, migration, and social stability" (World Food Program 2021). A press release by Christian Aid surrounding a land grabbing case in Sierra Leone asserts, "When they [farmers] lose access to the land they lose the ability to grow mineral and vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables which impacts badly on food security and nutrition. People are struggling to purchase food, or going without." Land grabbing also disproportionately affects women. Women make up 60-80% of the agricultural labor force but after a land grab takes place, women face disproportionate barriers to finding alternative employment (Mariama Tarawallie 2013).

Beyond the environmental and communal impacts of land grabbing, the dignity and human rights of farmers are ignored. In communities affected by land grabbing, former subsistence farmers must now become day wage laborers often with the only employer available being the agribusiness that took their land. These laborers are not guaranteed jobs from one day to the next and have no other way to survive (FIAN 2019). This has caused a trend in increased population in cities as dispossessed farmers are forced to migrate. People who do stay in rural areas are forced to work for extremely low wages in poor working conditions because they no longer have access to the means of production (the farmland). The impacts of land grabbing are severe. It impacts food security, environmental health, and human rights.

Land grabbing is part of an attempt to convert local subsistence farming into plantation agriculture which has many negative effects. Under plantation agriculture, large swaths of land are used to cultivate a single cash crop such as palm oil. This displaces farmers without providing them an alternative means of subsistence; furthermore, it is unsustainable because the fragile soils of Sierra Leone are not well suited to intensive monoculture. Attempts to circumvent fallowing lands with intensive agriculture leads to soil erosion and the poisoning of the soil and water with fertilizers. The fragile soils of sub-Saharan Africa are not well suited to the intensive agriculture of the United States and Europe (FIAN). Policies supporting

agribusiness investment in Sierra Leone have favored outside investors focused on increasing GDP and global exports over local communities' wellbeing.

In order to deal with the systemic problems causing world hunger, land grabbing, and human rights violations, a shift from the current neoliberal development approach to one that is community-based is required. Land sovereignty, as the TNI Agricultural Justice Program puts in a 2013 paper title “The Global Land Grab - A Primer”, “is the right of working peoples to have effective access to, use of, and control over, land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape. Simply put, land sovereignty is the realization of the working peoples’ human right to land.” Land grabbing violates all of these principles. Putting the land back into the hands of those who are the highest stakeholder (or in areas where land grabbing has not yet occurred, maintaining ownership within local communities) and allowing them to decide how it is cared for and used is important. Those with the highest stakes are most likely to steward the land sustainably because they depend on it for survival - harm to the land is harm to them. Therefore, in order for any solution to be successful, learning from and involving those most directly affected by land grabbing is critical.

The ideas of community development need to shift from focusing on GDP growth alone to focusing on community well-being holistically, including looking at food security and human rights (Sen). In order for this to happen the international community such as the UNFAO, the World Bank, the IMF, and USAID, along with academia must promote more of this holistic view of development. The UNFAO has begun to take more interest in land grabbing and started to acknowledge the importance of common-pool resource management (which is how agricultural lands in Sierra Leone are managed) versus private ownership. USAID has also provided some reports that contain a more accurate understanding of the land tenure system in Sierra Leone. However, despite acknowledging the harms of land grabbing, many of their initiatives such as land mapping and encouraging economic development are in tension with this concern. It is not easy to change this work. Decolonizing development by studying how communities have historically sustainably managed resources and supporting those communities is a start. This paradigm shift could change the way foreign aid and development initiatives are prioritized along with the Sierra Leonean government’s policies around land grabbing.

In addition to the influence of the international community, the political structure in Sierra Leone encourages the national government to favor agribusiness over their constituents. These challenges must also be addressed to prevent land grabbing. Financial incentives for government officials are skewed in favor of land grabbing. With subsistence farms, most of the benefits remain in the local communities, but with foreign direct investments, money is funneled through the central government in the form of fees, export taxes, etc., making it easier for corrupt officials to siphon this money off for their private gain. Additionally, corporations have been known to bribe local officials for their support. Sierra Leone’s governance structure is built upon the structure implemented during British colonization. While customary laws and traditions predating colonial rule recognize that local farming families are the owners of the land, the central government has language in Cap 22 which places the Paramount Chief with custodianship of the land. This legislation, borrowed from British colonization, may be used to justify the Paramount Chief signing away constituents’ land without their consent. Changes to legislation so that the true stakeholders are the primary decision makers and adjustments of financial incentives will be important for implementing rules and regulations to prevent land grabbing. Already, grassroots organizations within Sierra Leone are working to educate farmers about their rights, share the warning signs of land grabbing, and organize communities to resist land theft. With enough momentum and support, these efforts could impact government at the local and national level, particularly if done in combination with reforms to alleviate external pressures.

If the Sierra Leonean government is serious about addressing land grabbing, there are immediate steps that can be taken. Part of addressing land grabbing includes intervening where harm has or is occurring. Immediate action should be taken to assess current land deals to identify instances of land grabbing. SLIEPA works with Foreign Direct Investors to facilitate land deals. Interviewing community members where land deals have taken place will help uncover any human rights violations or environmental harms. Where land grabbing is identified, the government can work with the corporations at fault to determine what restoration and restitution is needed. SLIEPA should also immediately pause moving forward on additional large land deals until rules and regulations are put in place to prevent abuses.

To reduce land grabbing and its harms, regulations and provisions are needed so unbeneficial land deals are deterred and companies are held responsible if they engage in practices that harm local communities. One of these measures could require a third party to conduct an impact study to determine the environmental, social, and economic effects of the company's proposed plan for the land. Requiring that impact studies be released to the public, including local stakeholders, is a recommendation put forth in a case study on land grabbing in Sierra Leone published by Welthungerhilfe. Once the impact study is complete, it would be compared to the current environmental, social, and economic state of the land and its people; if the impact study does not meet predetermined requirements such as a minimum amount of local jobs created, or minimum environmental protection standards, or is assessed to cause more harm than good, the land deal can not go forth until the company revises its plans and accounts for the problems identified. Governmental, international, and public support would be required to enforce these measures and hold companies accountable. At the very least, robust impact study requirements around land development would dissuade exploitative corporations from exploring investments unless they were willing to invest money up front to assess the impacts of the proposed development which may significantly reduce instances of land grabbing.

When communities are interested in foreign direct investment, leasing contracts could require companies to provide a certain percentage of jobs to the communities whose land is being leased, distribute a certain percentage of the profits to communities, provide access to food for those who will no longer be able to rely on subsistence farming, pay livable wages, guarantee a union, and build infrastructure (ie. schools or roads). However, strong measures would need to be in place to ensure the lessee follows through on their commitments to the communities, since it is a common exploitative practice for companies to overpromise and under deliver.

The Sierra Leonean government could also provide local stakeholders legal support and guarantee village-level community consultation regarding large land deals being considered (Welthungerhilfe and TNI Agrarian Justice Programme). This is especially important given that there is only a 43.2% literacy rate in Sierra Leoneans 15 years old or older, and communities may not be versed in legal proceedings and rights. This could help ensure the proceedings are fair (UN Development report 2020). Part of providing transparent proceedings includes clearly explaining the investor's plans for the land and results of impact studies to these stakeholders.

Resisting land grabbing means valuing community well being over traditional means of creating GDP growth, increasing exports, and industrializing a nation. In order to actually help with hunger, poverty, and environmental degradation in Sierra Leone, indigenous lands should remain in the hands of indigenous peoples who have been practicing sustainable usage of the land and its resources for millennia. Combating this will require extensive community organizing and coalition building across the country and around the world. Creating rules and regulations to prevent land grabbing is critical in addressing the immediate impacts of land grabbing, while community-based development and land sovereignty principles can look beyond our current system and propose a sustainable alternative. If we want to be one step closer to ending world hunger, land grabbing must end in Sierra Leone.

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