

SDI and the EU-Liberia VPA: protecting forests, communities and the climate



In 2012, SDI stopped the destruction of two million hectares of forest by exposing that the logging permits covering this land were illegal. In 2016, SDI convinced the government not to hand out logging permits in agricultural concessions, thereby stopping further destruction of hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest. In 2015, SDI worked with 22 communities to secure \$1.25 million USD of logging taxes that the government had owed the communities for years. The communities have now received this money, and are due to receive another \$600,000 USD this year.

Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) is a Liberian NGO founded in 2002. Our mission is to protect Liberian forests and forest communities, by improving governance in natural resource sectors that threaten forests. We achieve this through advocacy to strengthen policies at the national level, as well as capacity building and empowering local community groups in the forest sector.



SDI work on forest governance and illegal logging

SDI is one of the key organisations reducing illegal logging and protecting forest communities' rights in Liberia. Illegal logging was a central source of funding for the civil war that ravaged Liberia from 1989 to 2003, and SDI's highlighting of this led the UN to ban all timber exports from Liberia until the sector was cleaned up. The founder of SDI, Silas Siakor, won the Goldman Prize in 2006 for this work. This gave the sector a fresh start after the war, as all logging concessions were cancelled and new forest laws were drafted that set a best practice precedent for forest governance in West Africa.

Nonetheless, across all sectors, Liberia continues to struggle with corruption. SDI has worked hard to document and fight this corruption. In 2012, we managed to get illegally-issued Private Use Permits cancelled, which would have created a loophole

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allowing logging companies to destroy more than two million hectares of primary forest. SDI and other Liberian NGOs have also gained much from the EU-Liberia Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) to end the export of illegal timber to the EU. This process has given Liberian civil society direct lines of communication with the Liberian government and logging companies, allowing us to push for illegalities in the forest sector to be cleared up, and putting us in charge of monitoring that commitments are enforced.

SDI has monitored illegal logging by training people from forest communities to become forest monitors, and helping them publicise the findings of their monitoring. So far, we have worked with the community monitors to publish seven briefing papers, one social audit and one community guide on the VPA process.

SDI has also worked with representatives of 22 communities to help them influence and monitor national policies, facilitating a network between them and training them in advocacy and the content of Liberia's forest laws. SDI has monitored the signing and implementation of these communities' benefit-sharing agreements with logging companies. Thanks to SDI's work, the community representatives are now able to ensure communities get the benefits they are owed by logging companies. This has resulted so far in the transfer of \$1.25 million USD to Liberian communities, with more on the way this year. This is not only thanks



to SDI's work, but also to the VPA multi-stakeholder committee, where communities are directly represented and have the same level of decision-making power as the government. It was in this committee that the owed community benefits issue was raised & resolved. In addition, SDI trained 60 community representatives in financial accounting and proposal writing, to enable them to access funds from the national benefit-sharing trust that contains this newly-transferred money.

SDI work on land rights

Thanks to campaigning by SDI and other Liberian NGOs, Liberia now has the most progressive land policy in West Africa, spelling out that communities are owners of forest land. This has created real hope not just for communities but for forests as well: experience from across the world has shown that forests survive best when the people living in them have a clear interest in protecting them.¹ A law to put the land policy into practice is now in front of the Liberian House of Representatives. However, 50% of the country's land has already been handed out in concessions, one of the highest ratios in the world. SDI created a Community Land Protection Program to respond to this situation. The program supports communities in the documentation, protection and governance of their customary lands and natural resources. It is currently operating in four counties (Lofa, River Cess, River Gee, and Maryland), supporting over 30 communities. In River Cess county, SDI has already supported 20 communities to document their customary land claims, including maps, boundary harmonisation, and the creation of a land use and management system. SDI is also an active member of the Liberian Land Commission, to advance the protection of customary land claims in policy and law.

SDI work on palm oil

The expansion of large-scale palm oil plantations is one of the main threats to forests and communities in Liberia. Since 2009, the government has allocated more than 629,000 hectares to foreign palm oil companies. These concessions overlie some of West Africa's only surviving primary forest, as well as the customary land of thousands of people. SDI is working to ensure palm oil companies comply with Liberian law and international standards on protection of high carbon-stock forest, community land rights, and community consent. SDI works with communities living in palm oil concession areas to update them about the palm oil plans in that concession, inform them about their legal rights, and ensure their voices are heard at the national and international level. Some key achievements include halting the expansion of the Equatorial Palm Oil concession on the customary land of the Joegbhan people, and facilitating a network of Liberian civil society organisations working on palm oil.

¹ World Resources Institute, *Protecting Rights, Combatting Climate Change* (2014).