

OPEN LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS OF THE LIBERIA FOREST AND CLIMATE RESILIENCE FORUM 2023

Date 1 February 2023

At COP26 in Glasgow in November 2020 President George Weah pointed out that Liberia needed climate finance to protect Liberia's forests.

"We who are the richest in terms of forest resources and biodiversity, are the poorest in terms of socio-economic development. Although we bear the brunt of the impact of climate change, we benefit the least from the existing solutions and financial arrangements currently in place for tackling climate change,"
[President Weah said.](#)

We could not agree more. As non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in Europe, the US and China, we fully support money flowing to highly forested countries and specifically to the indigenous peoples and local communities in those countries who are willing and often best placed to protect and sustainably use their forest resources.

However, as the Liberian press mentioned at the time, if you ask for money to protect forests you have to show you are capable of doing so.

"While we support the call by President Weah for more financial support to countries with rich forest and biodiversity, it is equally necessary for the President to show his government is actively addressing these illegalities and is changing his government's lackadaisical attitude towards forest protection and law enforcement. Asking for more money from the international community has to go hand in hand with showing that Liberia can manage and protect its forests and enforce its laws." [wrote Paul Kanneh](#) from Liberia Forest Media Watch.

And that is clearly not the case today. President Weah's Government is not only failing to control the rampant illegal logging in Liberia but is undermining the very systems in place to control this. This not only means that Liberia's forests are being destroyed, but also that the Government and the local communities are not getting the revenue they should. Even the Government's current programme of creating protected areas is falling short of Liberian law by seeking to impose protected areas on communities, without respecting their rights to own and conserve those forests themselves.

Corruption is rife. The [sanctions](#) that the US has imposed on Liberia's Chief of Staff to President George Weah, the Chief Prosecutor, as well as the managing director of the Port Authority, are striking indications of how far this corruption extends into the corridors of power. According to the US Treasury's Department's Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence [Brian E. Nelson](#):

"Through their corruption these officials have undermined democracy in Liberia for their own personal benefit.".... "Treasury's designations today demonstrate that the United States remains committed to holding corrupt actors accountable and to the continued support of the Liberian people."

As far back as 2019, [the World Bank concession review](#) uncovered that no forest concession complied with applicable regulations, and [Forest Trends](#) estimated that communities lost out on an estimated \$20 million (USD) from benefit sharing agreements.

Things have not got any better since 2019. Logging companies [are currently \\$21.4 million \(USD\) in arrears](#) to Liberia's Government. Only a few weeks ago the case of TSCA2, well-documented by Liberian NGOs, [who found evidence of illegal logging outside the TSCA2 permit](#), and by the Liberian Ministry of Justice - although the report commissioned by the Ministry has never been made public - surfaced again when the US logging company Renaissance Group Incorporated (RGI) was given the right by the Courts to export illegally sourced timber. The story was documented and widely reported last week by [Associated Press](#), including in the [Washington Post](#) and by [Mongabay](#). TSCA2 is, however, far from the only case about corruption and illegal logging. There have been frequent reports of intercepted containers with illegal logs, sometimes with FDA waybills (!).*

In the midst of illegalities and corruption, communities have struggled in seeking redress for the many violations they face, from companies breaching their contracts by over-logging to delays or non-payments

of logging revenues. Of the \$ 2.7 million (USD) appropriated in the 2022 National Budget for communities, only \$ 1.1 million (USD) has been actually paid. The remaining \$ 1.6 million (USD) has disappeared and although the Government owes the communities over \$ 6 million (USD), nothing is attributed to communities in the 2023 National Budget.

It is therefore clear that in Liberia today, illegalities are endemic. The Government is failing to distribute industry money owed to communities; there is a widespread misuse of funds and there is a clear lack of Government oversight or intent to implement the laws and regulations.

- We therefore call upon the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the US and European donors to demand proof that the Government of Liberia is serious in addressing illegal logging, protecting Liberia's forests, and ensuring communities benefit from their forests.
- We call on the Government of Norway, the World Bank and other donors to refrain from any carbon financing programmes or projects until the Liberian Government can provide full transparency – as required by law – and can prove that Liberia's forests are well governed, including respect for the rights of its forest communities.

It should be noted that in Liberia the land and forests, together with the carbon, are owned by the communities. Hence, they are the ones who need to be in charge of any carbon agreements affecting the future use and conservation of their forests.

- We call on China, the US and EU Member States and other timber importing countries to ensure that all timber imports from Liberia are legally and responsibly sourced, noting the high risk of illegalities.
- We call upon the Government of Liberia
 - to ensure all timber exports go through the LiberTrace traceability system, and to close down all existing routes for laundering illegally sourced timber.
 - to publish the official investigation report by the Ministry of Justice into the Renaissance case and implement its recommendations and follow the law.
 - to ensure the communities get the \$ 6.2 million (USD) still outstanding.
 - to refrain from creating protected areas against the wishes of communities and instead support the creation of a network of community conserved areas (as legislated for by the Land Rights act).

Signed by

ARA, Germany – Wolfgang Kuhlmann
Biofuelwatch UK/US – Almuth Ernsting
Blue Dalian, China - Sun Li
Both Ends, the Netherlands – Paul Wolvekamp
Dogwood Alliance, US - Scot Quaranda
EarthSight, UK - Sam Lawson
Environmental Investigation Agency, UK – Faith Doherty
Environmental Investigation Agency, US – Susanne Breitskopf
Fern, Brussels – Alexandra Benjamin
Forest Peoples Programme, UK – Tom Lomax
Forum Ökologie & Papier, Germany - Evelyn Schönheit

Forum Umwelt und Entwicklung, Germany – Laszlo Maraz
Friends of the Earth, Finland – Noora Ojala
Friends of the Earth, Netherlands – Danielle van Oijen
Gesellschaft für Ökologische Forschung, Germany - Sylvia Hamberger
Global Witness, UK – Veronica Oakeshott
Leefmilieu, the Netherlands – Maarten Visschers
Pro REGENWALD, Germany – Hermann Edelman
Rainforest Foundation, UK – Joe Eisen
Rettet den Regenwald, Germany - Marianne Klute
Scholar Tree Alliance, China - Zeng Shengwei
Snow Alliance, China - Mao Jing

* See for example [Ex-diplomat and police commander in illegal logging](#); [FDA seizes container trucks loaded with illegal logs](#); [FDA impounds containers illegally harvested logs](#); and [Leaked video exposes FDA rangers illegal logging operations](#).