



global witness

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Community forestry is being hijacked by global logging companies in Liberia, increasing risk of future conflict

Wednesday 10th October 2018 – A new investigation from Global Witness has revealed how progressive community forestry in Liberia is being undermined by the logging industry – using a number of shady tricks.

Liberian law is meant to give communities the right to sustainably manage their own forests, empowering people to nurture and protect their customary lands and to call the shots when negotiating with companies such as logging firms.

But the report ‘Power to the People’ – released today by the anti-corruption NGO – has uncovered how logging companies have hijacked this new approach, disempowering communities and undermining rules intended to place forests back in the hands of the Liberian people.

Instead of working with communities to give them space for negotiations, companies are dodging the legal process, forming secret pacts with local elites, and making decisions that serve their own interests rather than those of the community as a whole.

This is not the first time that the Liberian forest has been hijacked by large rapacious logging companies – the Private Use Permits scandal of 2012 saw the logging industry exploiting licenses designed for small operators, with millions of hectares of land handed over to illegal loggers.

Global Witness has also warned that this failure by logging companies to respect communities creates a serious risk of future conflict.

David Young, Liberia Campaign Leader at Global Witness said:

“It beggars belief that logging companies are continuing to exploit progressive forest practices for their own profit and gain. Not only this, but this blatant failure by companies to respect communities creates a serious risk of future conflict in Liberia.

“This is because logging companies simply aren’t ensuring benefits – and costs – are shared as they should be across the groups who are meant to have a say on these forests, increasing the risk of resentment about one group benefitting more than the other – and creating a fragile environment for conflict to start.”

The report comes after two years of research and exposes the ways companies attempt to grab timber for their own profit rather than negotiate fairly with the communities who own the land.

Many of the logging companies involved show opaque and unclear ownership.

Some show apparent links to Malaysian logging giant Samling, raising alarm bells that this notorious company – previously linked to the Private Use Permits scandal of 2012 as well as to committing widespread illegal logging – is seeking once again to expand its domination over Liberia’s forests.

David Young added:

“Done right, Liberia could be an exemplary model for other countries, showing how progressive community forestry can work. But behind this optimistic outlook hide a number of rapacious logging companies.

“These logging companies are moving fast and are poised to cause irreparable damage to Liberia’s rainforests. If approved, this would impact on a massive 45 percent of the country’s land. That’s nearly half of Liberia. It is vital this remains in the full control of Liberian people, not the logging industry.”

Logging companies are using a number of tricks to undermine community forestry in Liberia, including:

- **Seizing control** over community forests before permits have even been awarded to communities.
- **Drawing communities into secret pacts** by working with selected elites who haven’t been formally elected by the people to represent their interests.
- **Exploiting legal loopholes** to take advantage of weaker areas of regulation and maximise their profits.

Global Witness is calling on the Liberian government to take immediate action to investigate and cancel any unlawful company-community agreements, and ensure that its own rules are followed when new community forests are approved.

It is also calling on donors including Norway, the European Union, and the UK to press Liberia to implement the promised independent investigation into the legality of each existing permit, and ensure that any illegally logged timber isn’t being traded for profit by these exploitative companies.

Contacts

For interview and media requests please contact Heather Iqbal, Senior Comms Advisor

hiqbal@globalwitness.org

+44 7828 505 758

David Young, Liberia Campaign Leader

dyoung@globalwitness.org

+44 77 11 00 67 99

Notes to the Editor

1. Interviews are available on request – please email or ring Heather Iqbal. General/out of hours media enquiries please use media@globalwitness.org or +44 (0) 7912517127.
2. A selection of photographs and a map infographic showing the spread of these potential community forestry permits [can be found here](#). Please email hiqbal@globalwitness.org if you have any trouble accessing.

3. There are three pre-requisites for a logging company to operate in a community forest. First, under Chapter 6 of the Community Rights Law for Forest Lands, that commercial logging requires a contract between the community and the logging operator. Second, under Section 4.2 of the same law, that the only group that may sign a contract in the name of the community is the Community Forestry Management Board. Third, under Section 6.4 of the law, and repeated in Section 10.1 of the associated Regulations (2017), commercial logging (and therefore the contract to do so) is not permitted unless five conditions relating to the establishment of community governance structures and a forest management plan have been met. It follows that these five conditions can only be met after Approved Community Forest status is awarded and the Community Forestry Management Plan, has been written and approved. Thus, any agreement between a company and community, or any engagement of a company with ‘community representatives’ prior to these steps would be in breach of the law.
4. In 2011-12, 63 illegal Private Use Permits – occupying 2.5 million hectares or 23 percent of Liberia’s entire landmass were issued. These permits dodged the taxes and public competitive bidding process of other types of permit. They also contained no sustainability requirements, essentially giving companies a free pass to clear 40 percent of Liberia’s forests, including almost half of the country’s primary intact forests. Many of them were based on underlying land deeds that were of either suspicious provenance or had been forged. Above all, despite being on community land, typically these deals were done behind the backs of ordinary community members. In January 2013 President Johnson Sirleaf issued an Executive Order to cancel all PUPs.
5. The official investigation into the Private Use Permits listed Atlantic, Forest Venture, Nature Orient Timber Corporation and Southeast Resources as associated companies, all of which had committed “illegal actions”, and Global Witness has shown how these companies are all linked to the Malaysian logging giant Samling Global. Through its web of subsidiaries, Samling was the mastermind behind the Private Use Permits scandal, obtaining 36 of the 63 illegal logging permits issued, covering 17.5 percent of Liberia’s land mass. Despite this background, these companies have so far escaped the punishments recommended by an official report into the Private Use Permits scandal.