



To:

Norwegian Ministry of Climate and Environment
ArildSkedsmo

Arild.Skedsmo@kld.dep.no

Hege Ragnhildstveit

Hege.Ragnhildstveit@kld.dep.no

8 December, 2021

Subject: Complaint on Deforestation and human rights violation in the Agri-Business Sector in Liberia

Dear Arild Skedsmo and Hege Ragnhildstveit,

The undersigned organizations want to share our concerns and the need for urgent action to halt the ongoing deforestation and human rights violations in the Agri-Business sector in Liberia. Your collaboration with the Government of Liberia and the agreements under the Norway Forest and Climate partnership with Liberia provide for a strong platform to support and promote responsible agriculture, respect for human rights, and putting a halt to deforestation.

The Members of the CSO Oil Palm Working Group in Liberia and international partners have supported communities affected by industrial palm oil plantations for over a decade. We constantly monitor and expose harms in those plantations, stand by communities and human rights defenders to get access to justice, and have their rights respected.

We have published evidence of structural harms in the sector contributing to the destruction of Liberia's primary forests (deforestation) including serious land rights violations, labor rights violations, threats and harms to environmental human rights defenders, and pollution.

We have reached a point where we have to conclude that promises from the sector towards local development to the benefit of communities will not materialize. This is even more concerning because communities hand over their customary lands for plantation development based on these 'promises' in negotiations and social contracts (eg. Memorandum of Understanding). We have noted with great concerns that the commitments and obligations in these contracts are not being complied with by the respective companies. None of the communities is informed or has access to critical data and company documents on the number of hectares developed on their lands or expansion plans. And more specifically:

- Research findings from the Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) plantations (controlled by Singapore listed Golden Agri-Resources) indicate that for three MoU's half of the commitments and obligations were not met and another 20% was only partially met.¹
- Communities and workers affected by the Sime Darby plantations inform civil society that Sime Darby left the country without complying with the social agreements and contractual obligations. There is no information available on the contract from the new company and if they will take over the social contracts. Sime Darby shows no sign of repairing the damage to the environment and livelihoods in order to divest responsibly.
- Communities affected by Equatorial Palm Oil plantations have complained that they were coerced into an agreement they consider as sub-standard compensation for their lands and crops. They do not have a formal MoU to the best of our understanding. In addition, it has

1 SDI & Milieudefensie, August 2021, Golden Veroleum Liberia's track record: Broken promises and continued deforestation. <https://en.milieudefensie.nl/news/scorecard-golden-veroleum-liberia-web.pdf>





been observed that the communities need more living space for livelihood and settlement after EPO took most of their agricultural areas. With the expansion plans from EPO, they fear the further loss of livelihoods when the plantations move further and further into their forests.²

- Farmers and communities affected by MOPP have equally claimed that their lands were stolen from them and when they protest, they face criminalization as a result.

CSO-OPWG and partners often inform the Liberian government, through the NBC, LLA, EPA, and others who have specific mandates to control the Agri-Business sector in Liberia. These authorities have shown an interest in receiving our information, but have failed to act effectively to enforce the legal and policy frameworks within their agencies and mandates.

This neglect and slow response by mandated government agencies leave the communities vulnerable to exploitation and the activists and civil society partners at risk of intimidation and threats by the company and its proponents.

We want to note that a failure to monitor and control these multinational companies allows for the structural harm in the industrial plantation sector to continue.

We identify that the power balance between companies and government is disturbed. For example, we have reports from the civil servants responsible to provide access to concession information. They state they do not get the necessary documents from the companies under review. As a result, the online Liberia Forest Atlas is not up to date and this in itself is negligence, limits access to information, promotes poor participation of communities, and affects peaceful remedy to problems emanating from the operations of these companies. Affected communities and civil society do not have access to important information regarding the boundaries of concessions – this is cause for corruption, false claims, and poor response to both local and international instruments that regulate the operation of these companies.

We continue to engage but the civic space is shrinking. In May 2021 Milieudefensie and the CSO-OPWG had a round of meetings with the National Bureau of Concessions, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency. These meetings explained the conclusions from the High Carbon Stock Agreement Executive Committee that found GVL engaged in 1000 (estimated) hectares of deforestation to establish their plantations.³ Until today, there has been no follow-up as far as we are aware from the Liberian government to ensure that GVL is sanctioned or needs to implement necessary actions through national laws and the concession contract.

With this letter, we inform you about some of the evidence we gathered on environmental and social harms in the plantation areas and the lack of action on the part of the Liberian government. We would like to request if you could address these issues directly with the Government of Liberia as part of your engagement and commitment to protect the forests and promote the rights of Liberian communities. More specifically:

- The ongoing structural harms in the agri-business sector
- Lack of enforcement
- Need for a agriculture policy and a transition towards community based agriculture that benefits Liberians and protects the environment.

² SDI, October 2019, Timby Facts, <https://www.sdiliberia.org/publications>

³ <https://highcarbonstock.org/hcsa-grievance-mechanism/hcsa-gm-2018-1/>





We are open to any questions you might have.

Please contact us on email at csopalmoilworkinggroup@gmail.com or gardeayouway@gmail.com phone +231 770 001 456/+231 770 001 446.

Yours sincerely,

James G. Otto
On behalf -Liberian CSO-Oil Palm Working Group
Program leader, Sustainable Development Institute

Members of the CSOs-OPWG

- Alliance for Rural Democracy
- ERADRO
- Foundation for Community Initiatives
- Friends of Franbarnie International
- Green Advocates
- Natural Resource Women Platform
- Rights and Rice Foundation
- Save My Future Foundation
- Social Entrepreneurs for Sustainable Development
- Sustainable Development Institute
- Youth Focus Centre
- Community Rights Support Facility
- Liberia Forest Media Watch
- Volunteers for Sustainable Development in Africa

Affiliate members and partners

- Milieudefensie - Friends of the Earth Netherlands
- Forest Peoples Programme
- Both Ends
- FERN
- Oxfam Novib
- Bread for all

