



A PUBLIC DEBATE ON THE FOREST SECTOR

A modest awareness-raising project results in a civil society proposal for reforming the forest sector in a country devastated by civil conflict. Key elements of this proposal have now been incorporated in the Forest Sector Rehabilitation and Reform package for Liberia led by the US Government.

Since 1990, logging companies, rebel groups, criminal networks and the regime of former president Charles Taylor have colluded to plunder Liberia's natural resources. One of the few organizations to gather evidence of destructive logging practices, environmental abuses and the associated human rights violations is the NGO Sustainable Development Institute (SDI). Its aim is to stimulate public debate, influence policy development and enhance local and international understanding of these issues. A splendid opportunity for this came when in 2003 the United Nations Security Council instructed the new Liberian government to reform the country's forest sector.

ACTIVITIES To help civil society participate in and contribute to the process, SDI organized a planning workshop in April 2004. This was aimed at developing a civil society proposal that would detail the key issues the reform process should address along with a plan of action. The draft proposal resulting from the workshop was published for two consecutive days in one of Liberia's leading dailies with an invitation for public comment and input. Civil society representatives also appeared on a one hour live radio phone-in which was broadcast simultaneously on three different radio stations to discuss the draft proposal. All of this helped to significantly raise the level of awareness about the reform process. Following a review of comments and suggestions, the proposal was finalized by the civil society Forest Sector Reform Working Group.

IMPACT This small project resulted in the creation of a comprehensive civil society proposal for reforming the Liberian forest sector, securing space for civil society and public participation in the process. The proposal recommended an independent review of all timber concessions, after two failed attempts by the government. The project's recommendations



Illegal mining settlement.

also tackled issues such as sharing the revenue from logging with communities in rural areas. Most importantly, it ensured that the process remained focused on achieving good governance in the sector in the aftermath of the country's devastating civil war. The US government-led Liberian Forest Initiative (LFI), in which IUCN's Forest Conservation Programme is an active participant, fully incorporated the key elements of the civil society proposal in its Forest Sector Rehabilitation and Reform package for Liberia. By building alliances with NGOs working in the field of human rights and democracy, the linkages between conservation and social justice could be effectively communicated and understood by target audiences.

Together with other NGOs, SDI had already exposed mass lumbering violations by former president Charles Taylor which led the UN Security Council to ban the export of Liberian timber. All these achievements received international recognition in April 2006, when the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize was awarded to SDI's director Silas Siakor. He had already won another environmental prize for his efforts on an earlier occasion, the 2002 Whitley Award on Human Rights and the Environment.



Salvaged logs. All photos: Silas Siakor.

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