



# FLEGT in Liberia: Ongoing challenges in the VPA and opportunities for change

## Country context

The 2009 Community Rights Law (CRL) grants communities control and management rights over their forest resources. Communities are required to organise themselves, establish forest governance and management bodies, develop internal rules, harmonise boundaries with neighbours and develop a management plan. Communities must engage with external stakeholders including the forestry authority, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)/ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the private sector. Once communities complete these processes, they are granted control over their forest through Community Forest Management Agreements (CFMAs). Most CFMAs are then awarded by communities to logging companies who conduct logging operations. This puts Liberia's forest estate at significant risk of deforestation and degradation.

Photo by Alexandra Benjamin





This risk is manifested in different ways.

**First**, logging companies gain access to large areas of forest through agreements with multiple communities and can therefore extract timber over larger geographic areas. This contributes to large-scale unsustainable and sometimes illegal logging. By 2018, the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) had approved 36 CFMAs covering 722,456 hectares of forestland. By 2017, communities had handed 10 CFMAs covering 309,741 hectares to concessionaires to extract logs. No concessions have been awarded in the 15 CFMAs approved in September 2018 covering 371,576 hectares.

Communities consider logging operations as the only way to generate economic benefits from their forests. This creates an unhealthy reliance on / and relationships with logging companies. This situation may intensify as more than 100 new applications are in the application process.

**Second**, there are no clear guidelines for negotiating agreements and the FDA doesn't assist communities during negotiations. The FDA is clear that it does not have a budget to educate and train communities in community forestry.

**Third**, there are challenges in setting up governance structures. Many community governance structures are male dominated with little or no position for marginalised groups such as women and young people.

These problems have been well documented and reported to stakeholders including the FDA, the Community Forestry Working Group (CFWG), the EU and the Government of Liberia. At the sixth Liberia / EU Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) Joint Implementation Committee (JIC) meeting,<sup>1</sup> a civil society representative presented an investigation report<sup>2</sup> highlighting communities' vulnerability to external third parties and illustrated the need to strengthen community capacity to manage their CFMAs.

In response, the EU and the Government of Liberia highlighted the need to ensure that timber sourced from CFMAs comply with the law. In February 2019, the seventh JIC meeting agreed a fully constituted committee to integrate "timber sourced from commercially-oriented CFMAs into the timber legality assurance system". Success of this action will be monitored at the next JIC meeting.

1 <http://www.euflegt.efi.int/documents/10180/438736/Aide-m%C3%A9moire+from+the+6th+Joint+Implementation+Committee+meeting+%28June+2018%29/5c340a33-5ffa-243e-5473-5266771d658c>

2 <https://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/FINAL-SDI-briefing-05.pdf>



Rita Massquoi, a Liberian community member, standing in her families land that she is fighting to get back.  
Photo by Alexandra Benjamin

## Recent successes

- Capacity building of community governance structures is now in the spotlight, especially in community forestry. This is helping to ensure they can perform their mandated responsibilities as prescribed in the legal framework. During 2018 and 2019, SDI and FCI built the capacity of more than 1000 community participants and this is being scaled up to cover all approved community forestry structures across the country. The focus is monitoring social and economic benefits from agreements; calculating land rental fees; calculating the number of cubic meters of timber harvested; and calculating royalties owed for timber harvested.
- Communities are learning how to manage revenues from community forestry and use them to address community needs.
- The 2018 Land Rights Act presents an opportunity for to communities to exercise more control over the forest resources.
- CSOs are raising community awareness of the Land Rights Act.
- Client Earth and FCI has trained more than 30 women in five counties to increase their understanding of forest governance issues and boost their participation.



Photo by Alexandra Benjamin

- The Liberia Land Authority has developed various tools to implement the Land Rights Act.
- The International Land and Forest Tenure Facility has supported three CSOs and the Land Authority to work with 24 communities to secure their customary land in seven out of fifteen Liberian counties.
- There has been strong collaboration between civil society and the Liberia Land Authority.

## Major challenges

- The forest sector is facing increasing Government pressure to deliver revenues with a focus on community forestry.
- Gender issues are not being considered in the Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) implementation process.
- There is poor coordination between government agencies in the forest and land sector.
- The Government has been slow to implement the Land Rights Act.

## Priority asks/recommendations to the European Commission and Member States

- Continue political and financial support to the VPA and other process in Liberia, including capacity building and financial support to all stakeholders including the FDA, NGOs and communities.
- Promote a discussion on community based sustainable forest management to ensure communities are the drivers and not just receivers of economic benefit from logging their forest.
- Support collaboration between an international NGO and Liberian local partner(s) to build the capacity of communities to undertake enterprise development and sustainable livelihoods initiatives.
- Support incorporation of community forestry into the VPA legality framework
- Ask VPA implementing countries to maintain national support and commitment to the VPA to improve forest governance and curb illegal logging.

*This publication has been produced with the assistance of the UK Department for International Development and the Life Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Fern and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the UK government or the EU Life Programme.*

