



## *In Liberia, communities are learning strategies to assert their rights and control their natural resources*

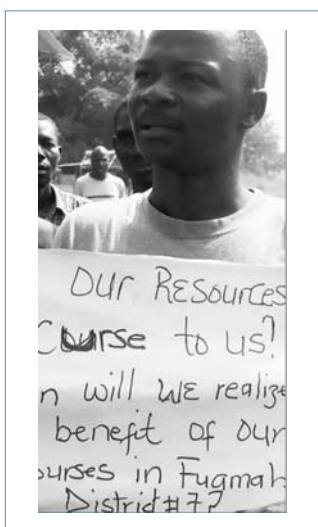
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When major logging and agricultural operations expand into their communities, many forest- and farming-dependent populations in Liberia struggle to collect the benefits they are due from the exploitation of their natural resources. These communities are entitled under Liberian law both to be consulted about such activities and to receive a percentage of land rental fees and related revenues. However, they often lack the guidance and tools to make these laws work for them. Since 2002, a local NGO called the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) has worked closely with rural Liberian communities on understanding their rights, while advocating on their behalf to ensure that domestic and multinational companies operating in their communities respect those rights.

Last year, SDI expanded and enhanced its advocacy efforts by deciding to provide direct legal support to communities. They launched the Legal Aid for Communities and the Environment (LACE) program to promote environmental and social justice and help communities deal with the impacts of mining, forestry, and agribusiness. LACE aims to provide legal support throughout every phase of a natural resource development project, making sure that communities understand their rights and can rely on knowledgeable counsel in their negotiations with major corporate actors. SDI recruited a small squad of junior lawyers for LACE, then turned to ISLP for specific legal training related to large-scale resource project as well as administrative guidance as LACE develops.

ISLP sent a senior lawyer to SDI in July 2014. Drawing on 25 years of experience with First Nations communities in Canada and issues such as collective land and water rights, he helped the LACE lawyers develop skills for negotiating community benefit agreements and worked with SDI on strategies for growing and sustaining its new legal department. Together, they outlined community priorities and potential obstacles, exploring solutions that could be tied as closely as possible to specific Liberian law. He also joined SDI in delivering a workshop in Bong County for 50 enthusiastic local community leaders on Liberia's draft Land Rights Act that would give counties title to their traditional lands. As a result of SDI's work, the law would additionally require the recognition of women's rights to property as equal to men's.

Sadly, the Ebola crisis brought nearly all non-health related activity in Liberia to a standstill in the second half of 2014. With the crisis subsiding, ISLP and SDI are moving forward once again, planning model contracts for use by communities and SDI; continuing the skills training for legal staff—with a particular focus on negotiating with big business; formulating processes to enable staff and communities to better monitor businesses' compliance with social licenses and benefit agreements; and helping SDI determine how best to hold companies accountable for any non-compliance, such as bringing complaints before industry grievance mechanisms. ISLP is eager to return to Liberia, where its direct assistance to SDI's legal team offers vital support to communities learning to assert their rights and control their natural resources.



*Community activists in Fugmah District, Liberia. photo:SDI*

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