



The Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) Response to Sime Darby's February 1 "Statement on UN High Level Panel."

(Monrovia, Liberia, February 21st, 2013) – On January 31st, the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI), along with its partners, released a “Statement on Oil Palm Concessions in Liberia.” SDI is a Liberian non-governmental organization whose purpose is to ensure that the nation’s natural resources are managed responsibly and that benefits from their sale are shared with rural communities whose lives are affected by extraction. Our statement was written to address the crisis over land ownership in the countryside that was created when the government signed away the rights to over 1.5 million acres of community land to two Asian oil palm conglomerates.

In order to propose a solution to the crisis rather than continue to dwell on the problems, SDI offered a three-point plan for the government, companies, and communities: 1) Revisit and amend the contracts to reflect the fact that community dwellers own their own land; 2) consultatively re-examine the agricultural policy of Liberia to ensure that it meets the objective of fairly reducing rural poverty; and 3) create and publicize a clear process for oil palm companies to engage in negotiations over the use of land owned by communities.

Unfortunately, rather than engaging with the substance of SDI’s proposal, Malaysian oil palm producer Sime Darby – owners of a concession that includes 51 percent of the total land area of Gbarpolu County – chose to attack our credibility and make a series of false allegations about SDI and its supporters at Friends of the Earth. We prioritize constructive engagement with concession companies, but it is important that the Liberian public understands all the facts and is not misled in the important debate over how their natural resources are used and for whose benefit. Therefore, we must address the statement released by Sime Darby on February 1.

Sime Darby’s statement claims that SDI’s efforts to educate communities about the contracts and to monitor the behavior of oil palm concessionaires are not supported in the affected communities, and that our published materials are “inaccurate.” To back up these serious allegations, they point to a letter released by the “Elders of Gbarpolu County” which states: “SDI is no longer welcomed [in Gbarpolu].” In addition, Sime Darby claims that we removed our report ‘Uncertain Futures’ – a lengthy investigation into community experiences with Sime Darby in Grand Cape Mount County – after they pointed out errors. Both of these statements are intentionally misleading, and should not distract the conversation away from Sime Darby’s contract or its early record in Liberia.

Sime Darby’s evidence for our lack of support among community members rests solely on a single letter, which was signed by the Gbarpolu County Superintendent, Allan Gbowee, and attested to by three others. For comparison, the SDI organized and hosted a three-day conference last November for representatives of communities affected by oil palm concessions. The conference declaration – which criticizes the way the contract was negotiated – was signed by nearly 150 farmers, teachers, and traders from across the country. The Superintendent’s letter was not written after any formal outreach to communities in the county, and at least some residents have expressed concern that it misrepresents their views. Given that

the letter was written and signed by a government official, we urge Sime Darby to cease portraying it in public as an accurate account of the views of community residents in Gbarpolu County.

As to the comment about our withdrawal of 'Uncertain Futures' – this is an outright falsehood. SDI never removed the report from the public domain, and we continue to stand by our methodology, investigation, and conclusions. The report is not presently online due to an overhaul of our website, which should be completed by the end of March. We urge all Liberians who are interested in obtaining a copy of the report to contact us, and we will ensure that one reaches you. We will allow you to be the judge of our credibility, but we believe that Sime Darby was right to praise our “professionalism and intellectual capacity” in the letter they wrote to us after the report was published. In fact, we engaged with Sime Darby repeatedly before releasing our findings.

It is crucially important that the inaccuracies in Sime Darby's statement do not distract from the ultimate purpose of our campaign, which is to safeguard the rights of Liberian communities to enjoy the benefits of their own land and natural resources. While both Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum - another oil palm producer operating in Western Liberia - have promised to address criticism and change their operating procedures, we suggest that such promises are only words unless they are included in amended contracts and written policies.

For Liberian communities to be granted the respect and rights they deserve and are entitled to, the concession agreements must be amended to indicate that those communities enjoy all the rights of deeded landholders, and that oil palm companies must enter into separate legal agreements with those communities if they wish to use their land. Sime Darby said it clearly in the letter they wrote to us after we published 'Uncertain Futures' – “[T]he original agreement for the land was between Sime Darby Plantation and the government, not the communities themselves.” We believe this was a serious error that must be addressed without delay. Nearly every community member we have spoken with in the past year points at this lack of consultation as a source of confusion and outrage.

SDI and its partner organizations have worked for years, often in difficult circumstances, to ensure that corporate concessionaires and public officials do not strip poor Liberians of their natural wealth. We were an active voice pointing out the scandal of Private Use Permits and have been strong advocates for a fair land policy that protects the rights of rural communities. Across the country, community members will attest to the value of the advice, advocacy, and partnerships we have built with them. Our intention is not to slow development, but rather to ensure that it occurs in a fair manner that benefits the poor as much as it benefits those who seek to profit from their resources.

Therefore, we ask that Sime Darby, Golden Veroleum, and the Government of Liberia consider our proposal to 1) Revisit and amend the contracts to reflect the fact that community dwellers own their own land; 2) consultatively re-examine the agricultural policy of Liberia to ensure that it meets the objective of fairly reducing rural poverty; and 3) create and publicize a clear process for companies to engage in negotiations over the use of land owned by communities for industrial palm oil production. They should work together to closely examine the current state of affairs in the oil palm and agricultural sectors.

Rather than continue to dwell in a state of tension and insecurity, amended contracts would allow local communities to assume bargaining power and security over the land that they rely on to survive and which their mothers, fathers, and grandfathers cultivated before them. We stand ready to enter into public or

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private dialogue with all parties to the current crisis, in an effort to find a fair and just solution that will enable Liberia to become an example of responsible land use throughout Africa.

Signed,

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While SDI re-works its website, we have uploaded a series of photos and videos that feature community members discussing their experiences with industrial oil palm concessions to <http://www.foei.org/en/media/resources-for-journalists/sime-darby-and-landgrabs-in-liberia>. We believe that these voices speak for themselves, reflecting an urgent need for change in Liberia's agricultural and oil palm sectors.