

COMMUNIQUE FROM THE CONFERENCE OF LAND OWNERS AND LAND USERS

We the delegates from eight districts and twenty chiefdoms either affected or about to be affected by large scale land acquisition for agribusiness in Sierra Leone at a conference of land owners and land users at the Saint Edwards Pre-school hall in Freetown from 2 – 3 April, 2012, while:

Acknowledging that there is need for investment in agriculture to ensure food security and sustainable development;

Being aware of government's priority in agriculture, particularly with smallholder commercialization and attracting large scale investors in agriculture;

Being mindful of the right and access to land to support farming, access to traditional medicines, energy and water sources, cultural and social purposes, and further mindful of farming as a way of life and source of livelihood for the majority of Sierra Leoneans;

Recognizing the dire need for women to have secure access and rights to land and the challenges of land availability, given climate change and population growth, and further recognizing the need for sustainable and diverse ways of food production to reduce poverty;

Hereby wish to state our serious concerns about large scale land acquisition for agribusiness in Sierra Leone.

MAJOR CONCERNS

We are concerned that:

- there is a glaring absence of free, prior and informed consent in all the communities, and there is no transparency in the land deals;
- consultations on land acquisitions are poor, excluding women and other stakeholders;
- there are no binding regulations for large scale agro-investments and monitoring mechanisms in place;
- there is no national watchdog body to monitor large scale land deals and industrial investments in agriculture;
- there is no effective environmental management of land, water and vegetation in lease areas to prevent destruction of resources, water sources, native herbs and wildlife and to protect the livelihoods of those that depend on these;
- community understanding of negotiating for large scale land deals is weak or non-existent and farmers have no access to independent legal representation to help them negotiate for their own interests, and to ensure fair compensation and content in the agreements;
- traditional leaders, especially paramount chiefs, are serving as poor gatekeepers and some prevent direct community negotiations with the investors;
- women that have lost their land and thus their livelihoods have no viable or safe alternative livelihood, and thus are the most vulnerable;
- the investors do not provide relevant assistance and support to affected communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, we call on the Government of Sierra Leone and all decision-makers at all levels (international, national, district, chiefdom and local), to implement the following recommendations:

- in the absence of free, prior and informed consent in all the communities, we call for a review of all the agreements relating to the land investments, and education of all stakeholders of the content of all the agreements;
- there must be full involvement of all stakeholders in the communities in all the consultations and negotiations on land deals, especially women;
- a system of monitoring mechanisms must be put in place, and the government should establish regulations to safeguard rural populations in the face of large scale land acquisitions and industrial plantations;
- appropriate environmental management systems must be put in place to protect land, water and vegetation in lease areas to prevent destruction of these resources, to protect the livelihoods of those that depend on these;
- support is needed to help communities build their capacity in negotiation for compensation and content of the agreements, and they should be provided with independent legal counsel;
- traditional rulers, especially paramount chiefs, should allow the full participation of their constituents, especially land owners and users, in the consultation and negotiation processes;
- women that are affected by loss of their farmland and thus their livelihoods must be provided with safe and healthy alternative livelihoods;
- the land investors should provide relevant assistance and support to affected communities;
- land investment for agro-business should be designed to increase food security, not decrease it.