BY JOCELYN C. ZUCKERMAN

A WORLD AWAY

TO FEED THE PALM OIL BOOM IN THE WEST, AFRICA'S FORESTS AND FARMLANDS ARE UP FOR GRABS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCO DI LAURO

PLOWED UNDER In northern Liberia, an Asian-owned company has begun work on an oil palm concession covering more than half a million acres.

DISPOSSESSED
In Sinoe County, Benedict Menewah, center, lost his farm and rubber trees to Golden Veroleum.

"YOU SEE THAT COCONUT TREE?" said Daniel Krakue, gesturing out beyond the windshield. "That used to be a village."

It wasn't hard to see the tree.

Apart from a skinny papaya trunk, it was the only thing rising from the surrounding sea of green. We were in Sinoe County, in southwestern Liberia, on a plantation run by a company called Golden Veroleum (GVL). For miles around there was nothing growing but baby palms, whose lime-colored fronds were about as wide, some three feet or so, as they were high. Earlier we'd driven through large expanses freshly cleared of their native vegetation, weird deserts of orange mud interrupted only by the corrugated wakes of the ubiquitous giant yellow earthmovers. The company has been in operation in Liberia only since 2009. And the 543,000-acre lease it signed with the government runs for 65 years, with an option for a 33-year extension, so GVL is just getting started.

Krakue is an environmental advocate who has worked with the Sustainable Development Initiative (SDI), a local partner of Friends of the Earth, and he had accompanied me here from Monrovia, the nation's capital, on a road so riven with ditches, potholes, and impromptu lakes that it took us eight hours to go 150 miles. Sinoe County is home to some 104,000 people, but its isolation and its history as a center of the civil wars that wracked this tiny West African nation from 1989 to 2003 have left it with the ambience of a place that's been forgotten.

We pulled over in a village called Pluoh, a scattering of mud-and-thatch houses, where a sign staked in the ground read MALARIA SPOILS BELLY. Aside from a few chickens scratching around and a preschooler in a raggedy party dress vigorously cranking a water pump, there wasn't a whole lot going on. Little clusters of people sat on crude wooden benches propped beneath the thatch eaves of their huts, and the cries of babies floated on the still morning air. Krakue introduced me to Benedict Menewah, a scrawny 45-year-old father of seven, who filled me in on the story of the lone coconut tree.

He described how GVL had shown up with its Caterpillars in the village he'd grown up in and where his father, Smart Williams, still lived. Hearing the sound of machinery, Williams, a 77-year-old with stooped shoulders and clouded blue eyes, had gone to see what was up. Representatives from GVL, a Liberian company whose anchor investor is based in Singapore, asked to see his father's deed, Menewah said. "We don't have a deed," Williams told them, "but this is our land. Where would we get a deed from?" (In fact, very few rural Liberians have physical documentation related to the land their families have inhabited for generations.) "They said the land was for the government," Williams told me later, "not for us." The company proceeded to plow under the family's cassava, yams, and plantains, in addition to the 500 baby rubber trees that Menewah had recently planted with intentions of selling the latex. They disassembled Williams's home and put the mud bricks on a tractor so he could rebuild elsewhere.

"The bush is our supermarket," Menewah said, explaining how he used to hunt for small animals as well as gather fruit. "We get everything here. But now they've taken it all." The company gave him a single payment of $340.

Williams was particularly broken up about the two breadfruit trees that his great-uncle had brought back from Ghana in 1922 and which, along with bush meat and "palm cabbage" (finely chopped, tender young palm leaves), had kept the family alive during the long years of fighting. "We lost our auntie, our uncle, our nephew, our niece," Menewah said, spreading his arms to show me the horizontal scars from where the combatants had tied him up.

The coconut tree had apparently been left, along with the nearby papaya, as a courtesy when the company bulldozed everything else around the graves of Williams's father and uncle. GVL encircled these with a rickety wooden fence. Whenever he or his father tries to tidy up the way they used to, Menewah said, "the company says we are damaging their property."

COLONIZED BY FREED SLAVES FROM THE UNITED States after 1820, Liberia has been a poster child for what is known in development circles as "the resource curse"—a place where natural bounty has translated into more harm than good. In the early twentieth century, the American rubber baron Harvey Firestone signed a 99-year lease to grow the commodity on a million acres, nearly 4 percent of Liberia's total land area. In the 1990s, the warlord Charles Taylor turned to the nation's abundant timber reserves to fund his exploits, which saw the deaths of some 150,000 Liberians and wiped out what little infrastructure existed in the country. (Krakue's former colleague Silas Kpanan'Ayoung Siakor, the founder of SDI, teamed up with the London-based NGO Global Witness to document Taylor's "logs of war," ultimately helping to bring him down and earning the Goldman Environmental Prize.)

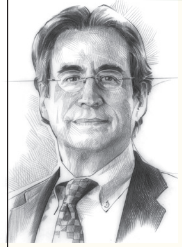
But recent years had seen things beginning to look up. In 2005 Liberians elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf president, Africa's first female head of state. The Harvard-educated World Bank alumna took office with an uncommonly high and positive international profile, having both done jail time for her criticism of an earlier regime and served in the nation's finance ministry. Johnson Sirleaf has continued to garner plaudits for leading her country out of its dark past, and in 2011 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her role in promoting peace, democracy, and gender equality. She has steadily improved the nation's economy. But she has accomplished this in large part by signing concession agreements with outside investors drawn to Liberia's natural wealth, which, in addition to rubber and timber, includes rich mineral and agricultural resources. By 2012, Johnson Sirleaf had signed over a full 30 percent of the nation's land.

Such "land-grabbing" isn't restricted to Liberia. The World Bank has said that Africa is home to fully half of the world's fertile yet "unused" land, and in the wake of the global food crisis of 2008, outsiders have been acquiring huge swaths of that prime acreage from governments eager for foreign cash. (Many of these deals have been financed by the bank itself.) As of last year, no fewer than 330 million acres of African land had changed hands. Some of the new concessionaires are governments lacking arable land of their own, particularly in the Middle East. Others are multinational corporations responding to the growing global demand for biofuels and for diets heavier in grain-fed livestock.

THE OIL PALM COMPANIES IN LIBERIA ENJOYED a brief honeymoon. (In addition to GVL, the Malaysian corporation Sime Darby runs a 769,000-acre operation in the north of the country.) But it wasn't long before local communities began to cry foul. Villagers I met during a visit to the Sime Darby concession accused the company of destroying their crops

ILLUSTRATION BY BRUCE MORSER

from NRDC GOOD GOVERNANCE



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How widespread are the "land grabs" described in this story?
Unfortunately, Liberia's problems are not isolated. Some of the world's poorest people increasingly have to compete with some of the richest for control of the same resources. For almost two decades NRDC has supported indigenous and other local communities threatened by enormous development schemes, especially in the Americas. For example, we worked with fishing communities to defeat plans for a massive saltworks at Laguna San Ignacio, Mexico, the last pristine nursery for the gray whale. That was a huge victory. In the 1990s we helped organize an international coalition to combat land grabs in coastal areas of Latin America, Africa, and Asia to farm shrimp, the most popular seafood in the United States.

Why is there such a lack of accountability in these projects?
The bottom-line challenge is the dearth of decent governance. In an online poll conducted by the U.N., more than 1.2 million people in more than 190 countries ranked 16 priorities for their families and for a better world. Interestingly, folks in both rich and poor countries named "honest and responsive government" in their top four. Liberians are far from alone in seeing a gap between what their leaders say at international summits about "sustainable development" and the realities at home. It's clear that the existing international system, which is now 70 years old, is not up to the task of moving us rapidly to a more sustainable future.

If the system is so badly broken, what can we do to fix it?
NRDC played a leading role in last year's U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20. We called for a new kind of summit, where leaders would do more than talk, and it was encouraging to see presidents, prime ministers, mayors, CEOs, and other leaders commit more than $500 billion for action on energy, oceans, transportation, cities, and other issues. One potential game-changer that came out of Rio+20 is the Tropical Forest Alliance, which brings together Unilever, Coca-Cola, and other multinational corporations to work with governments and conservation groups to make the global supply chain for palm oil and other commodities "deforestation free" by 2020. This was also the first summit of the Internet age. We saw what new communications technologies have begun to accomplish: unmasking wrongdoing, engaging citizens in worldwide campaigns against land grabs, and protecting the human rights of the poorest among us.

and grave sites, polluting streams, displacing residents by force, and failing to get “free, prior, and informed consent” before clearing their land. The work of planting and watering the oil palm was too hard, they said, the wages too low, and safety equipment inadequate or nonexistent.

The community in Grand Cape Mount County, home to a large part of Sime Darby’s plantings, eventually joined forces with SDI’s Siakor and the nonprofit Green Advocate Liberia, led by a lawyer named Alfred Brownell, in hopes of having their grievances addressed. In October 2011, a group of residents filed a complaint with the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the global certification body for the industry. A year later, the communities inside the GVL concession in Sinoe filed a similar complaint. Both concessionaires responded by commissioning studies by the Forest Trust, a Switzerland-based nonprofit focused on ethics and sustainability. The trust’s reports bore out most of the communities’ claims. Moving forward, it said, GVL and Sime Darby would need to review their land-acquisition processes and their social and environmental policies and improve communication with the locals.

The companies have been in damage-control mode ever since. “We are under siege,” GVL’s Viggy Ponnudurai told me when I visited the concession. GVL had invited journalists to visit, he said. “We have given them meals and treated them like our friends. And then they have still written bad things about us.”

How did it all go so wrong? After all, there’s no question that Liberia can use whatever infusions of cash and whatever jobs it can get. “I think the two companies have come to the realization that they were misled,” SDI’s Siakor told me. The contracts that Johnson Sirleaf signed with Sime Darby and GVL stipulated that she would allocate the land “free of encumbrances,” he explained. “But those lands just don’t exist.”

Compounding the problem is the fact that Liberians have seen this story play out before, with less than happy results, as I learned during a visit to the Firestone (now Bridgestone-Firestone) plantation, an hour south of Monrovia. The place is massive, with 200 square miles of shimmering trees, and boasts its own hospital, schools, churches, and bus service. But most of the housing—single-room shacks patched together with scraps of metal and wood—dates to the 1930s. Hanging in the air is an odor that’s one part sweet sap, one part raw sewage. The company’s 7,000 employees earn five dollars a day. The white liquid latex that they collect in buckets gets exported as it is, without any processing that might add value to the local economy. In the distance, I could see a group of laborers streaming down a narrow path bordered on either side by tall wire fencing. There were manned checkpoints throughout the concession. On a nearby hilltop, the management-only “staff club” served club sandwiches and cold Heinekens, while men in golf carts cruised the greens below.

Alfred Brownell, who grew up dirt-poor in the shadow of one of Liberia’s big mining concessions, told me that back in 2005, when rumors of the oil palm companies’ arrival began to surface, “We said, ‘Don’t copy and paste the Firestone model. It’s a disaster for this country.’ And guess what? Sime Darby and Golden Veroleum? It’s exactly the same as Firestone.”

DAILY COMMUTE Golden Veroleum workers cram onto a tractor-drawn flatbed on their way to plant and water the fields.

THE OIL PALM TREE IS ACTUALLY NATIVE TO WEST and central Africa. A century ago, British siblings William and James Lever, whose company would become Unilever, ran a 17-million-acre palm concession in what was then the Belgian Congo. But it’s only in the past few years that the crop has begun to transform the landscape of this continent. For several decades planting was focused in Southeast Asia, with Malaysia and Indonesia together accounting for 85 percent of global output. With worldwide production now approaching 50 million tons a year, however—palm oil is present in half of all packaged food products, as well as in such drugstore staples as lipsticks and body lotions—producers have been scrambling to find new frontiers. Imports of palm oil to the United States alone have increased 485 percent in the past decade.

The crop takes a dramatic toll on the environment. In 2007 the United Nations Environment Programme reported that oil palm plantations were the leading cause of deforestation in both Malaysia and Indonesia, removing a vital carbon sink and devastating the native habitat of orangutans and endangered Sumatran tigers and rhinos. The trees thrive at latitudes of roughly five degrees to the north and south of the equator, and in Africa that swath of earth runs thick with natural forest. The Guinean Forests, which stretch from Sierra Leone to Nigeria and once covered all of Liberia, have been identified as one of the 25 most important biodiversity hot spots on the planet, and what happened in Asia is a harbinger of what may happen here. As with any industrial-scale agricultural endeavor, the plantings have far-reaching impacts on both water supply and water quality—and, given the pesticides and other agrochemicals involved in growing oil palm, on the soil itself.

The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil provides only limited protection, with standards that lag far behind those of bodies like the Rainforest Alliance or the Forest Stewardship Council. It allows the use of the herbicide paraquat, for example, which has been banned in Europe because of its harmful effect on human health. Where endangered species are concerned, the roundtable suggests only that “their conservation be taken into account.” As for climate change, it merely “strongly encourages” members to “commit to a process” to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

MAP BY JOE LEMONNIER

The companies say that in the wake of the RSPO complaints they have taken numerous measures to set things straight. A Sime Darby official told me that the company has raised the price it pays local people for their destroyed crops, installed 37 hand pumps (though villagers said most of these had already broken down), helped to set up rice-farming plots in cleared swamp areas, and promised to work with the community to avoid destroying areas of cultural importance. GVL, for its part, has set aside 350 acres for the production of local crops, providing technical support, farming implements, and seeds.

The company continues to build worker housing and has completed three clinics. The two operations do provide a lot of jobs: GVL employs 2,200 people and Sime Darby 3,000. But those figures don’t come close to the numbers of people who have subsisted for generations on the 1.3 million acres that the plantations now occupy. Nor are there any safeguards in the agreements to ensure that jobs go to those who have lost their land. The lack of planting areas means that food now has to be brought in from elsewhere, at a cost that’s often out of reach for locals. (This in a country where, according to the government, fully 81 percent of the rural population suffers from hunger and malnutrition.) At the same time, traditional sources of income such as rubber tapping, hunting, and basketmaking have evaporated with the disappearance of the forests and swamplands that once supported them.

In 2011, after the residents of Grand Cape Mount County filed their complaint against Sime Darby, Johnson Sirleaf called them out for trying to “undermine your own government,” saying that the constitution granted it alone the right to negotiate with foreign investors. But mounting discontent has forced her government to change its tune. By April 2013, the situation on the GVL plantation had become so fraught that the president flew there and acknowledged that mistakes had been made. “Before we signed that agreement,” she told the community in Sinoe, “we should have come and sat down with you. Now we want to fix it good for you, for the government, for the country, for the county.”

“Even the government of Liberia does not have the capacity to negotiate with these conglomerates,” attorney Brownell told me. “The government budget this year was $500 million [$553 million, to be exact]. Sime Darby’s is more than $3 billion; Golden Veroleum’s, $1.6 billion. These companies have the top-notch lawyers in the world, the top-notch advisers. The government of Liberia is like an ant when it’s negotiating with these people.”

To make matters worse, Brownell said in reference to the Sime Darby concession, there is little oversight to ensure that citizens’ needs are being met. “You don’t have any person from the government looking over it,” he said. “It’s a state within a state.”

Sime Darby’s head of communications, Carl Dagenhart, speaking by phone from Malaysia, admitted that the company is largely left to its own devices. “Whenever an investor is doing business in a country which has been traumatized to such a degree as Liberia, of course, in many respects we will be a little bit on our own,” he said.

Dagenhart added that Sime Darby’s investment had the potential to transform the Liberian economy. The company will build a refinery as

EARLY START By 7:00 a.m. each day, these women on the GVL plantation have reported for duty in their assigned work groups.

soon as it reaches some 250,000 acres of plantings, he told me. Nothing in the concession agreement requires the company to do so, however, and many doubt it will happen. Moving to such a value-added endeavor would require "additional investment and long-term commitment that the companies do not want to make," SDI's Siakor said. "We haven't seen that happen in the timber industry, we haven't seen it in the iron ore sector, and I don't believe it's going to be different for the palm oil sector."

PERHAPS THE MOST DISTURBING ASPECT OF THE ongoing oil palm conflict, and of Liberia's recent history more generally, is the way it has tarnished the image of President Johnson Sirleaf. In May the Liberian chapter of the watchdog organization Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) issued a strongly critical report on the concessions. Between 2009 and 2011, it said, almost all of the $8 billion worth of resource contracts in the oil, forestry, mining, and agriculture sectors had been carried out in violation of Liberian law. (Of the 68 contracts studied, only six were deemed "compliant.") GVL's $1.6 billion project had been awarded without "any competitive bidding," EITI charged, and Sime Darby had been able to nearly double its acreage without competitive bidding.

This leaves the government with two options, said Siakor. "One, you cancel the concession agreements and redo them. Or two, you simply say, 'We are aware that these were done unlawfully; therefore the contracts are illegal, but we will allow the companies to operate anyway.'"

"Many of these lapses were human error," Liberia's minister of information, Lewis Brown, told me when asked about EITI's charges of illegality. "People were incapable of administering these laws, first because they were new and second because they were complex. With the multitude of things she has to do, [Agriculture Minister Florence Chenoweth] probably forgot to file these certificates in that folder."

Johnson Sirleaf has also come under fire for nepotism, having appointed three of her four sons to prominent government positions—Fumba as head of the National Security Agency, Charles as deputy governor of the Central Bank, and Robert as key political adviser and president of the National Oil Company. (In response to widespread criticism, Robert resigned from both posts in September.) Last October, Leymah Gbowee, one of Johnson Sirleaf's two co-laureates for the Nobel, publicly called out the president for nepotism and for failing to fight poverty and stepped down from her position as head of Liberia's reconciliation commission. In April, in its annual report on human rights around the world, the U.S. Department of State said that Liberian officials "engaged in corrupt practices with impunity."

Those who have spoken out on environmental problems and government corruption say they have faced intimidation. In Kparn Yah Town, a village on the Firestone plantation, I had seen a badly polluted stream, a charcoal-colored sludge that stank of chemicals. When I inquired among the villagers, they told me they weren't allowed to speak about it. A high-ranking official there confirmed that in March 2010, after the community had prepared a legal complaint about the situation, the president showed up and pleaded with them to withdraw it. She obliged them to sign a memorandum of understanding with the company that included a gag order. "It was written there," one elder told me. "Never talk about the pollution. It is the law."

I also met with an activist who was imprisoned last year by Fumba Sirleaf's National Security Agency after speaking out about the government's failure to address the pollution at Firestone. He later fled the country and is seeking asylum abroad. (He requested anonymity out of concern for the safety of relatives in Liberia.)

In August, Johnson Sirleaf's government shut down the print operation of *FrontPage Africa*, arguably the country's most independent media outlet, and threw its publisher and managing editor, Rodney Sieh, into prison for failing to pay damages on a libel charge stemming from a story the paper had run about corruption in the agriculture ministry.

When asked about this, Brown, the information minister, again insisted that I look at these events in the context of Liberia's history. Pressed on the State Department's comments on corruption, he responded with a belly laugh. "Yes, there is corruption here and there," he said, "but we're talking about a part of the world where corruption is perceived as second nature." I would likely be reading more on the subject, he added, "because of the expansive nature of freedom we have in the country, especially freedom of the press."

So why was Rodney Sieh in jail? I asked.

The government would like to see him released, Brown answered, but "cannot afford to meddle in judicial matters."

As for critics like Alfred Brownell and Silas Siakor, he described them as "fairly credible people" and "constructive partners" who had a role to play in the ongoing negotiations over the oil palm plantations. But the attitude I encountered among local government officials in Liberia was considerably different. The conflict over the GVL concession was all Brownell's fault, said Milton Teajay, the Johnson Sirleaf–appointed superintendent of Sinoe County. "I know about five persons who have been agitating and who have been propping up rebellion against GVL," he said. And Alan Gbowee, the superintendent of Gparpolu County, where Sime Darby is hoping to expand its operations, said his problem was that SDI was "trying to incite people against development."

HOME COOKING This farmer's crop of palm nuts will be pounded into the fiery-hued butter that is a staple of Liberian cuisine.

Both officials sought to minimize it, but anger at the concessions was palpable wherever I traveled. In Totoquelle, a village in Gparpolu County that is slated for development by Sime Darby, the chief, Emmanuel Jangebah, even raised the specter of violent resistance. "If we see bulldozers in the bush," he told me, "we will take our machetes and run to meet them."

LAND GRABS HAVE ALREADY LED TO VIOLENCE elsewhere in Africa. In April 2012 five workers on an Ethiopian project run by a Saudi agribusiness company were shot dead in a dispute over land rights. The year before, two civilians in Senegal were killed after state security forces were deployed in response to protests. And in 2009, a deal involving the leasing of more than two million acres to the South Korean company Daewoo Logistics contributed to the overthrow of the government of Madagascar.

Liberian groups like SDI and Green Advocate Liberia are doing their best to head off similar scenarios. They have begun using GPS to map the communities slated for plantations, and they continue to call on the government to reconsider its approach to the concession agreements, suggesting, for instance, that lease payments be made directly to the affected communities.

"I don't see that it's possible to stop [land grabs], José Graziano da Silva, the head of the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization, told Britain's *Guardian* newspaper last year. "We can't wish them away, but we have to find a proper way of limiting them. It appears to be like the Wild West," he added, "and we need a sheriff and law in place."

In May, after three years of discussions, the Committee on World Food Security, a division of the FAO, adopted guidelines calling for government transparency about land deals and better consultation with local communities. The directives are purely voluntary, however, and risk, in the words of Olivier de Schutter, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, "providing policy makers with a checklist of how to destroy global peasantry responsibly."

Siakor and Brownell both suggested to me that outsiders might have a role to play. In recent years, companies like KFC and Cadbury have begun replacing the palm oil in their products for the Australian market in response to an outcry over the ingredient's environmental impact in Indonesia. And last April, Unilever—now the single-biggest buyer of palm oil in the world—pledged to purchase all of its oil from traceable, sustainable sources by 2020. "Consumers in the West need to be told that they also share responsibility," Siakor said. "Their consumption is driving the demand."

In the end, if Liberia is to avoid falling victim yet again to the resource curse, if the fruits of its natural bounty are to benefit the lives of its four million citizens, the key question will be how the country is led. At a meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative in New York in September, President Bill Clinton told the audience that while foreign companies in the developing world have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically, it is governments that ultimately determine the fate of their nations. Nearly every Liberian I spoke with expressed growing impatience with the country's leadership. With four years remaining in her final term, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has the time to set things right. Whether she has the will is another question.

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