



## **Press Release**

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*Monrovia, Liberia*

*Brussels, Belgium*

A new report, launched in Monrovia today, proposes formalizing customary Liberian land ownership by registering it as private property. This would signal the launch of a reform agenda that would restore the forest land rights of the overwhelming majority of Liberia's rural populations; made up of poor agrarian families and clans.

The report published jointly by the Liberian NGO Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) and FERN, based in Brussels, presents the findings of a land tenure study commissioned by the Sustainable Development Institute last year. It calls for restitution of customary owners' *'right and title'* to their land areas in terms which unambiguously recognize it as private property rights. Courts would uphold this *'right and title'* to the same degree as other private rights and owners would be subject to full compensation in the event of compulsory acquisition for genuine public purposes by the government.

Forests and land rights activists have welcomed the report and concur that this will not just bring long overdue justice; it will also put the Liberian forest economy on a sound and uncontested footing.

*"Only as recognized owners and with the natural rights of owners fairly attended to, will the immense conservation force of rural communities be harnessed. Only as recognized owners will they, along with national exchequers and big business, have the means to secure and improve their livelihoods. Only as recognized owners will the resentments that often drive forest degradation dissolve."* Silas Siakor, Director of the SDI, reechoed one of the key arguments presented in the report at the launching ceremony.

The post-conflict government, led by President Sirleaf, is looking for ways to put the use and benefits of Liberia's invaluable forest resource on an equitable and conflict-free footing. A new forest law is in place and a Community Rights Law is to be added in the coming weeks. This law is expected to lay out both the rights,

powers and duties of rural Liberians in respect of forests and the procedures for their participation in governing, conserving and benefiting from the resource.

The Community Rights Law would lay the foundation for customary land tenure in rural Liberia that lends itself to a forest governance system in which communities take on primary responsibility for the governance, conservation and management of the forest, under the technical guidance and supervision of the state.

In recent decades there has been a tendency to not consider customary land interests as amounting to property. This report shows that there is a stronger contrary legal history in Liberia, which not only did so but also issued certificates of collective title to applicant communities, particularly prior to 1960. The result is that a significant part of Liberia's forest resource is already formally titled to communities and this is a strong viable foundation for furthering the process.

*“The positive conditions that exist in Liberia mean that it could redress land injustices more easily than almost any other country on the African continent”* says the author, Dr. Liz Alden Wily.

The report however warns that relations between the state and people living in or relying on forests are at a turning point in Liberia and that depending upon decisions made in regard to the report's recommendations these could degenerate into unhappy crisis or move into positive reform. The crux of the issue is property relations; or simply put *“how the rights of rural Liberians to forests are conceived and treated in law and practice. The status of customary land rights is at the centre of both the problem and the solution.”*

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