
[Liberia: So, who owns the forest? New SDI-FERN publication](#)

In 2003, Liberia emerged from 14 years of national and regional conflict that left around 270,000 people dead and 1.5 million displaced. Presidential elections in November 2005 were won by Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first ever female president. It is well documented that the conflict was in part fuelled by uncontrolled exploitation of and competition for Liberia's resources, especially timber. This factor along with associated corruption and revenue misappropriation led to sanctions being imposed on Liberian timber exports by the UN in 2003. Following a review that showed that the timber industry did not provide any real benefits for local communities and that the total area given out in logging concessions was twice the size of the total forest estate, President Sirleaf's administration cancelled all concessions, put in place a moratorium on all logging activities, and passed a new forestry law.

Despite its many shortcomings, this law states that a new law must be enacted before the end of 2007, governing community forest rights. This has created a new impetus to develop a legal framework that can form a fairer basis for sharing the many benefits that Liberia's forests and other natural resources have to offer.

In a new study, led by Liz Alden Wily and published by the Sustainable Development Institute in Liberia (SDI) and FERN, clear steps towards the development of such a law are outlined. The report, based on field research by SDI, documents the current system of customary law in place and proposes how the existing system could and should be incorporated in a statutory law that ensures local people become the rightful owners of the land they live on.

This landmark study brings together existing legal texts and new on the ground research to document that honouring land rights is compatible with economic growth. The study clearly shows the path to improved and decentralised forest management can be based on local structures and warns that issuing concessions over community lands could trigger new conflicts.

The report is available at http://www.fern.org/media/documents/document_4078_4079.pdf and on www.loggingoff.info under Liberia. For more information: saskia@fern.org, director@sdiliberia.org