

## SIERRA LEONE: Making land policies work in the interest of vulnera- ble groups

In Sierra Leone, poor land management has led to serious disputes and conflicts for years. Until now, traditional leaders and investors have made important decisions over the heads of land users and women while they have suffered injustices such as restrictions on their traditional land use. It was high time to redress this power imbalance.



### Widespread land disputes

The Paramount Chiefs are powerful traditional leaders who have benefited from land transactions and have long opposed changes in decision-making processes. The interests of women and other vulnerable groups were often ignored in transactions. Their land ownership and, their Right to Food were subject to the whims of powerful interests. In Malen Chiefdom, the Socfin Agricultural Company leased 18,473 hectares of a total of 21,000 hectares to establish its palm oil plantation without the consent of many smallholders, forcing them off their land and worsening their food security.

### Empowering citizens and decentralized dialogue on land rights

Four civil society organisations are now taking action against such injustices: the Network Movement for Justice and Development, United for the Protection of Human Rights, Partners Initiative for Conflict Transformation and Forum for Human Rights and Development. Supported by Welthungerhilfe, they formed the Land for Life Consortium in 2019 and began raising awareness of land rights among small-scale farmers, women and other vulnerable groups. At the national level, Land for Life advocates for land rights that are consistent with international human rights standards. Important instruments in this regard are the United Nations Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Adequate Food, which are further stipulated in the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Management of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT). The Civil Society Academy strategically supported Land for Life in the legal reform process to improve lobbying with traditional leaders and media work.

Two strategies have proven specifically successful in the fight for land rights: Through intensive work by the consortium in the communities, they were empowered to participate forcefully and clearly in consultations on draft laws - such as the Traditional Land Rights Act and the National Land Commission Act. This ensured that the interests of communities, and women in particular, were considered in the laws. In parallel, the establishment of decentralized multi-actor platforms (MAPs) in four districts of the country was a crucial strategy. The MAPs are dialogue platforms in which investors, community representatives, traditional leaders and administrative officials take part. They play an important role in breaking down hardened fronts and replacing them with a culture of dialogue. Questions and complaints about land rights are regularly discussed in the MAPs and various interests are considered. For citizens previously excluded from such meetings, this is now an important forum to assert their rights and resolve land disputes.

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### My land rights, my voice

The fierce resistance of the Paramount Chiefs could not be ignored by the government and led to the new laws nearly being overturned several times. The first breakthrough was a dialogue in April 2022 that brought all relevant actors together at one table. Land for Life and its dialogue approach were instrumental in this successful meeting. Through public pressure, negotiations and compromises, the two groundbreaking laws were finally passed a few months later. Important demands from civil society have been considered: the land ownership of women and other vulnerable groups will now be protected. Community members are guaranteed a say in decisions that affect their land. A 30% quota of women in all decision-making bodies from the village to the national level

was introduced. Another important provision states that both “landowners” and “land users” (who are implicitly not owners) are represented in the village and chiefdom-level bodies. This regulation prevents deals between Paramount Chiefs and investors that are not in the interest of land users.

To fully exploit the new legal framework, Land for Life is now pushing for the rapid implementation of the laws and the establishment of new institutions. Here too, the dialogue platforms play an important role at the decentralized level. The new laws have increased interest in the platforms, especially among women. The moderated dialogue supports fair and peaceful resolutions of land disputes and prevents many potential conflicts. The dialogue platforms introduced by Land for Life are an important pilot initiative for decentralized committees provided for in the new law.

It is still too early to assess the impact of the new laws on the lives of citizens. New unfair deals over the heads of citizens are certainly becoming less likely. There is reason to be optimistic that agricultural investors will bring greater benefits to communities in the future. In the longer term, the law and the greater involvement of citizens in the dialogue on land rights, land use and agricultural development open up good opportunities to improve agricultural production and the nutritional status of families.

### Lessons learned

- **In addition to civil society advocacy and citizen mobilization**, it took a lot of groundwork by senior government officials and roundtable dialogue to convince Paramount Chiefs to accept important changes.
- **Empowering women should go hand in hand with raising awareness among men**, particularly traditional leaders who may feel threatened by changes in the power structure.
- **Good media work and close relationships with journalists made injustices in land rights public**. This helped push the reform forward.
- **By building a strong civil society coalition and committed advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups**, it was possible to confidently negotiate with powerful interest groups.



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**Marie Olimbo Sesay,  
Land Owner, Port Loko District:**

I was marginalized. I was denied access to my father’s land because I am a woman. All hopes were gone for me. It was only with the passage of the Traditional Land Rights Act that I regained my dignity and my right to my land. I’m glad I was able to fight in court for my right to own and use the land. Thank you to Land for Life and United for the Protection of Human Rights for educating women about their land rights.

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Further Information <https://land-for-life.org/countries/sierra-leone>