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Investigation Mission on County Social Development Funds

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## Investigation Mission on County Social Development Funds

When President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected in 2006, she recognized that the country's development had been hugely concentrated in Monrovia even though revenues from concession agreements were generated from all 15 counties. To rectify the situation and promote development throughout Liberia, her government initiated the County Social Development Funds (CSDF). An initial US\$200,000 was annually set aside from the National Budget for each county so locals could execute their own development projects. However, the functioning of the CSDFs is an issue that is under significant public criticism because communities have limited or no involvement in decision-making and there are concerns about widespread corruption in the administration of the funds. In order to help lawmakers resolve this, NDI, with its advocacy partner the CSO Coalition on Natural Resource Management Consortium (NRM) and Nimba County Representative Larry Younquoi, conducted an Investigative Mission (IM) from August 7-8 on the CSDF in Bong and Nimba Counties.



***NRM's Jackson Speare (left) and Nimba County residents prepare before the start of the Investigation Mission.***

The purpose of the IM was to learn from the challenges and successes of Nimba and Bong counties with the CSDF thus far. The mission was conducted in two phases, the first being meetings with the local government officials including county superintendents and the heads of the CSDF Project Management Committee (PMC) which is the implementing arm of the local government). The second phase was a series of focus group meetings with a diverse group of civil society organizations (CSOs).

In comparison to Bong Country, Nimba County and has been more successful in the use and implementation of CSDFs even though it has a larger number of concession areas. In Nimba, each district receives a portion of the funds and the local government works with citizens identify and prioritize their needs. Half of Nimba's CSDF is used to rehabilitation of roads, while the rest supports other projects and administrative costs. In contract to Nimba County, Bong County's PMC has difficulty in accessing county funds and there is very little consultation with citizens regarding the allocation process. The meetings with CSOs from both counties flagged the following challenges:

- Undue interference of lawmakers in the administration of funds hampers the implementation of projects.
- CSOs, especially in Bong County, are not involved during the process of assessing the needs of the county by its officials.
- County government officials often do not disseminate information on the progress of county level.
- Accessing CSDF funding from the Ministry of Finance in Monrovia is a slow and bureaucratic process—which causes delays of payments to

contractors for projects.

- Prioritizing issues is difficult because there are so many needs including the lack of competent teachers and medical practitioners, poor roads, limited access to quality education, dearth of clean water and sanitation facilities, and a lack of administrative offices in districts, among others.

Using the findings from the IM and other information from their regional platforms, NRM, with NDI's assistance, will draft a policy paper to include recommendations for addressing gaps in concession agreements. Further the paper will also provide guidance on strengthening policies for the management of the funds. Later this year, NRM and NDI will organize a public issue forum to discuss the policy paper with legislators, and other government officials and members of CSOs, to map a way forward.

## **Solving Land Disputes Key for Liberia's Development**

On Monday, August 10, 2015, the Joint Committee on Land, Mines, Energy, Natural Resources and Environment of the Liberian Legislature conducted, with support from NDI, a public hearing on the draft Land Rights Act (LRA). The main goal of the LRA is to address and solve the country's growing number of land disputes.

Many lawmakers, government officials, experts, and civil society leaders believe that land disputes are a continuing threat to stability, economic growth, and peace in Liberia. Many citizens are either involved in domestic land ownership battles or in a clash with companies for royalties owed to them from concession agreements. Notably, on May 26, 2015 a group of angry citizens from Butaw, a district in Sinoe County, where Golden Veroleum Liberia palm plantation operates, protested in demand of benefits from the use of their land. A similar situation occurred on July 3, 2014 in Nimba County, when citizens organized a demonstration on Arcelor Mittal's facilities and damaged some of the companies' properties.

Senator Albert Chie, who chaired the public hearing, opened the event with a reference to the history of land disputes. "Since its establishment as a nation, Liberia has been plagued with a variety of land problems and issues; court dockets and sources of alternative dispute resolutions abound with land cases, not mentioning the many deaths, destruction of property and violence that have resulted from land issues."



**Lawmakers, witnesses and audience during the hearing.**

NDI worked with the Joint Committee to identify appropriate topics and witnesses for the hearing including representatives of civil society, government ministries and commissions, and technical experts. In total, 16 witnesses were invited and 11 testified during the public hearing. Much of the testimony, whether in favor of passing the act immediately or supporting further debate, revolved around the economic and social impact the pending legislation could have on Liberia. Several witnesses pointed to the importance of defining land ownership and land rights to the economic growth of Liberia. For example, Minister Patrick Sendolo of Ministry of Lands, Mines and Energy, began his testimony by characterizing land as a tool that fosters economic development. He also underlined the importance of the law in raising awareness and knowledge among citizens on how to deal with land disputes.

Other witnesses argued that the draft bill would affirm the right of all Liberians to own land and improve social conditions throughout the country. Betty Sharpe, on behalf of the CSO Working Group on Land, appealed to the committee members not to delay with the passage of the act. She said lawmakers should consider the use of land by mothers, *'some of whom are the parent of a lawmaker,'* for farming to earn money, so they can send their children to school.



**Madam Betty Sharpe of the CSO Working Group on Land parades in front of lawmakers to demonstrate her group's seriousness for the passage of the act .**

## **NDI's Intern Leaves for Follow-Up Study**

As the adage goes, *"there's never a good in good bye"* so it is with NDI's Jonathan T. H. Rose. He joined NDI Liberia in May 2014 as an intern and left NDI in early August 2015 to pursue graduate education in Zimbabwe. While at NDI, Jonathan worked with NDI's –partner CSOs such as the Institute for Research and Democratic Development (IREDD), the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC), and the CSO-coalition on Natural Resources Management (NRM). He was an invaluable member of the NDI team and his hard work and enthusiasm for new opportunities will be missed.

Jonathan believes his stint with NDI has contributed immensely to his career growth. *"It is indeed hard to say good-bye, but I do believe that my internship developed my professional skills and knowledge more in depth, so I can contribute better to the development of Liberia"*. Jonathan obtained a scholarship from the Africa University, through the United Methodist Church based in Mutare, Zimbabwe. He will work toward a Master's degree in Human Rights, Peace and Development Studies. In 2014 he graduated from the University of Liberia in sociology. NDI staff members organized a farewell in August and presented him a

certificate of appreciation. Paul Binkley, NDI's Resident Director, hailed Jonathan for his hard work and dedication to NDI's program in Liberia.



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